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ROGUE'S LUTE

It would be churlish did I fail to acknowledge the debt I owe to M. Pierre Champion, the eminent historian. His scholarly researches and devotion to his craft greatly helped me in writing this novel and, before his death under the German occupation, I was much heartened by his kindly encouragement. The main trends of the narrative agree with M. Champion's treatise on Villon.

P. R.

ROGUE'S LUTE

by

Philip Rush



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TO
MY WIFE GERALDINE
IN GRATITUDE



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PART I

CHAPTER I

It was from force of habit that François Villon continued on his way home after Catherine had again made a fool of him and, his anger dropping suddenly away, he was surprised to find himself outside the Mule tavern in the rue Saint-Jacques. Irresolutely François lingered on the footway, envying the warmth and bustle of the tavern, which contrasted so vividly with the quiet of his uncle's house in the cloister of Saint-Benoît over the road.

That February dusk in the Paris of 1452 was cheerless enough. A damp wind whistled through the narrow streets, driving sleet into the faces of the few Parisians still out-of-doors. The streets and houses had their usual winter covering of snow, but the suspicion of a thaw had set in and occasionally a slide of snow from a roof or gable would engulf some unfortunate traveller. Those who hoped to escape by walking in the roadway risked a worse fate, for the cobblestones were pitted with deep holes, filled with slush, and the gutters were a mixture of dirty water and rotting filth of every sort. A few carts rattled over the cobblestones, their cursing drivers risking a broken wheel in their eagerness to be indoors before curfew, and a solitary horseman splashed François with black slime from the gutter.

Muttering curses, the student drew his shabby gown more closely to his thin body, and as he did so the door of the tavern opened, letting out a cheering flood of light. In the doorway stood a man he knew well, a Savoyard student named Robin Dogis, and a buxom girl. His arm round her gleaming, naked shoulders and his eyes on her almost naked breasts, Robin Dogis tried to persuade the girl to brave the dirty streets but, pointing to her dainty shoes and satin gown, the girl pulled back towards the tavern.

"I'm spending no more money to-night," said Robin. "Do you imagine a poor Savoyard can have a bottomless purse?"

"You're mad to think I'll come out in that filth," said the girl. "Come to see me to-morrow, if you can find some more money." And she rushed incontinently back into the tavern.

Robin Dogis shrugged his shoulders, and as he pulled his leather belt straight he caught sight of François.

"François Villon!" he cried. "What, in the name of all the devils in hell, are you doing out there?"

"A foolish question, Robin," said François. "I'm no Savoyard and I have got a bottomless purse. It's never had a bottom to it."

Robin grinned good-humouredly.

"You heard my talk with that little drab, did you?" he said. "She would have cleaned me right out in another hour and I should have had nothing to show for it. But I'm not so hard put to it that I haven't a few deniers for François Villon. He's worth a lot to any University man and I'd like to show appreciation of that last lampoon you wrote. It's hard to keep a straight face whenever Jean de Conflans opens his mouth, for you hit the goat-faced old bore off perfectly."

"If I go home, I shall have to discuss the treatises of Boëthius with my uncle," answered François.

"By Saint Denis, that settles it, François. Take these deniers and get as drunk as they'll allow. I'd rather like you to go into the Mule this evening. I fancy you'll enjoy yourself."

Robin Dogis smiled at some secret joke and, thrusting a handful of coins on François, he was gone. François stuffed the money into his purse and, needing no second bidding, hurried into the tavern.

He found himself a seat near the fire and, eagerly sniffing the smells of wine, roasting poultry, and the burning oak-logs, he ordered wine to be brought quickly. But when he had dried himself by the fire and, beginning to sip his wine, glanced eagerly around the tavern, his sudden elation was pricked out of him. The customers in the house that evening were nearly all professors from the University, gathered together after a meeting of the Senate at the Church of the Mathurins.

François listened gloomily to the well-known sonorous voices of the pedagogues, realising that this had been Robin's secret joke. The only comfort he could find was the absence of his own tutor, Jean de Conflans. François was in no mood to stand Jean's high-pitched, earnest voice, and as he was due to take the examination for his Master of Arts degree in less than six months Jean would not have failed to prate of students who waste their valuable time in pleasure-seeking.

Thinking of Jean, he at first failed to hear the quiet voice at his side or to realise that it was speaking to him. Some seconds were necessary to collect his wits, and see that the man who sat smiling and repeating his request that they should drink together was one he had noticed in talk with some of the pedants.

This man was tall, with a habit of stooping forward slightly and looking up under his eyebrows, showing the whites of his eyes, so that it appeared to François as if he was walking upstairs towards him. But this stoop was no sign of a studious habit or weakness

of body. The man gave an impression of great strength, toughness, and vitality. His face was long and gaunt, with sunken, leather-hard cheeks, and the scar of a sword-cut slashed across his left temple. His complexion was swarthy and his clean-shaven chin showed a fringe of black stubble. His hair was cut in a very short crop, but as near as could be seen that also was black. In this sombre frame the man's light blue eyes came as a shock, like those of a collie dog. But his mouth was set in a cynical, thin line and the cold blue glitter of his eyes spoke of a nature that would stand ridicule from nobody. Yet, for the moment, he was obviously trying to be cordial.

François did not like the look of the fellow and roughly answered that the company was not to his liking that evening. But the stranger ordered more wine, with his confident smile unchanged, and said that one of the professors owed his father money. "My father always sends me to collect obstinate debts," he said, with a grim smile. "People don't care to argue with me."

An uneasy silence came between them whilst they waited for the wine, but as soon as it was poured out the stranger said that his name was Colin de Cayeux, and his father was a locksmith, living in the Saint-Benoît quarter.

"The solitary drinking you indulge in is unnatural, especially to a student," he continued. "I see by your gown that you are a scholar of the University and in my time the University men made the jolliest company in the world."

François listened with great interest. The wine that had been brought was hypocras and the man who treated a stranger to hypocras, one of the dearest of wines, must be very foolish or very designing. Perhaps this de Cayeux was only a pimp, who would make off as soon as he found there was no money to be had for his girls. But it was not every day of the week he had the chance even to smell hypocras and, becoming at once more friendly, François told Colin that he too lived in the Saint-Benoît quarter and so had his bellyful of ecclesiastical and university company.

"By day and night their droning voices buzz in my ear."

"We used to seek other distractions," said Colin, "and it's no wonder the students still amuse themselves by annoying the citizens and fighting the police. Did you have a hand in that affair last year when the boundary stone was stolen?"

"To run around stealing boundary stones from old women is not my idea of a joke," François answered. "It's not worth the candle. My uncle says the King has become tired of the constant strife between Church and Parliament and is only waiting his chance to cut off some of our privileges."

"A calamity that must never be allowed!" cried Colin.

"A calamity certainly," said François, "but you don't find me risking my skin in the business one way or the other. If the Provost took me in a student brawl, and strung me up without trial from the gibbet in the nearest square, it would be no use if the Church kicked up a great fuss over its dearly loved son called François Villon. There'd be no sense in that for me, rotting on a gibbet!"

"I see you are a realist, a man after my own heart," answered Colin. "But I must say I think this accursed Provost has become arrogant because of his friendship with the King."

"He's not so black as he's painted," said François. "I once heard him say at dinner——"

But the remark made by Robert d'Estouteville at dinner was never told, because Colin interrupted to ask eagerly how he came to be so intimate with the wealthy Provost. François saw that it would be difficult to make Colin believe he had no money to spend on women and, deciding that he had best hold his tongue, he answered that the Provost had been met at the house of Jean de Seguin, the fashionable priest, when he had gone there with his uncle. But Colin was not to be denied and he asked François many questions about the Provost: how old was he, what were his tastes, was he faithful to his wife, and how best to touch his compassion: until François asked if he was expecting to be boxed up in gaol. Colin then said he had got a friend in prison and that it was good to remember such little points, but he hastily brought the conversation back to the boundary stone.

"Mlle. de Bruyères is the rich widow of a notary, isn't she, living in the rue de Martroi?" he said.

"Yes," answered François. "If gold crowns were fat capons and deniers mushrooms she would never go hungry in a hundred years. But the crazy old harridan thought more of the ancient boundary stone that stood outside her house than she did of her money, and there came to some students the notion of seizing the stone whilst the old woman was at her prayers in church. A mob soon gathered and the stone was dragged off in triumph to the University quarter and set up on the montagne Sainte-Geneviève in the rue du Mont-Saint-Hilaire."

"That caused a rare commotion!" muttered Colin.

"The old girl waddled off to the Provost and nearly brought his roof off with her complaints. The sergeants were sent to seize the stone and they put it for safety in the courtyard of the Palais Royal. But our men, helped by the law clerks, invaded even those precincts and lugged the stone back. They have made it their headquarters, forcing the citizens, and even the police, to salute as they pass!"

"Not bad!" said Colin, laughing. "Good as anything we did."

"Stolen signs are brought there from houses and taverns," continued François, "and the quarter is kept awake every night by the playing of fifes and pipes and the cries of 'Murder!'—'Fire!'—and such-like pranks designed to keep the householders shivering under the bedclothes. Complaints are increasing and peevish citizens, eyes red from loss of sleep, are continually at the Provost's door. There's no doubt the authorities will have to take action again."

This and other tales of the streets of Paris kept the talk moving for a long time and still de Cayeux made no professional mention of women. François thought him a very forgetful pimp, but the bottles of hypocras continued to make their appearance and the two drank until François was ready to say or do anything. Once his tongue had started to wag it was always hard to stop, and, the path of his thoughts suddenly changing, he told Colin of the insults he had suffered from a woman called Catherine de Vausselles.

"She's not beautiful," he cried, grimacing like a monkey, "but for some reason I'm like clay in her hands. The first time I saw her I swore we'd sleep together and the little bitch knows I mean to have her. She takes advantage of it, leading me to believe my wish is her wish and then cleverly retreating at the last moment."

"Her sort is well known," interjected Colin, "but it beats me why a man should hanker after any one woman. They're all made alike and I could introduce you to as many women as you like with big breasts and good strong buttocks and no nonsense about them."

"I've been waiting for that," said François. "But it's no use offering your women to me, Colin. I have no money, never have had, and probably never shall have. You can't expect that every man a pimp approaches will prove a good customer."

"By God's liver, I'm no pimp!" cried Colin. "I've only stood you drinks because you seemed out of place in this company and I liked the look of you."

The mistake amused Colin. A wide, slow grin split his lean face, showing the yellow stumps of his teeth. He doubled his long body in a silent, convulsive laugh.

"There's an idea for you!" he cried. "Everybody in Paris sells wine and pimps are just as reasonable as amateur taverners."

But François had lost interest. Nothing mattered to him except his tale of unrewarded love and he insisted on telling Colin all about Catherine.

"You're drunk!" said Colin, seeking to divert a conversation fast becoming burdensome to him.

But François, speaking fluently, in a high-pitched, jerky voice, took no notice of him.

"When the schools were at last over," he cried, "I hurried to the rue Mont-Sainte-Genève, where she lives with her father, although I knew my absence would cause them worry at home, and I hung about at the street corner in the hope of seeing her. For over an hour I lounged there until the housewives had decided that I was up to no good and I was forced to play marbles with the children as an excuse to stay. You can imagine my feelings when I looked up and saw Catherine smiling at me from the footway. Sometimes her smile seems to say that François Villon is a fool, sometimes to invite his advances, and at other times to say both the one thing and the other until he doesn't know whether he's on his head or his heels."

"I should take it she thinks you a fool!" growled Colin.

"However that may be," cried François, "I jumped to my feet, almost fell into the gutter, and greeted her as best I could. She asked me to walk to church with her and we walked away as loving as a betrothed couple on the banks of the Seine. She was so frisky that I asked her to come and drink at the Abreuvoir Popin. She agreed and the affair seemed as good as over. What girl, I ask you, goes to that notorious house near dusk unless she is ready to satisfy her lover?"

François paused to empty his tankard. Unsteadily his hands groped for the bottle again, but instead he pressed them on his throbbing temples and then, shrugging his shoulders, continued:

"In fact, I was walking by her side with a vague feeling of disappointment that she had given way so readily when two young gallants came along, dressed up to the nines, flop-over leather boots and full rig-out, and greeted Catherine as if by appointment. I said she was coming with me but, although we had met before at dinner, they took no notice. I appealed to Catherine but that slut, looking down her crooked nose and smiling sweetly, said she could not think what she was at when that promise had been made. 'For you see, François,' she said, 'your gown is so shabby and your shoes down at heel. People would stare so and a girl has to be careful of her reputation these days.'"

Despite his condition, François quoted her words in an exact imitation of an affected woman's voice. Then he made a tipsy grab at Colin's shoulder and his voice rose even more shrilly:

"That's what she said, man, believe it or not. And cool as you please, off she walks with those two dummies whilst I stood gaping and did nothing. Everybody sniggering behind my back whilst I did nothing at all!"

"And a sensible thing too!" interjected Colin. "What sort of a show do you think you would have made against two fellows doubtless armed with swords and you with a toy dagger stuck in the belt under your gown? You should thank your lucky stars you're well rid of a teasing jade of a woman."

"But think of the dishonour!" cried François. "I let them take her away whilst the whole street laughed at me! I should have thrown myself at them and been cut to pieces so long as my honour was saved!"

Colin stared at François, not expecting sentiment to come from him, and wondered if he was joking. He saw that the student was tall and lean as a cat, with a slight droop to his shoulders. His face was long, with high cheek-bones, and not a trace of colour; his forehead high and bony. The mouth was wide and sensuous, with rather full lips, and the nose hooked and prominent. His black eyes were bright and piercing, missing nothing of what was going on around him. Although he could not have been more than twenty-one, his hair had already receded from the temples, adding to a general impression of cynical raffishness. Colin thought he looked the last man in the world to be suspected of sentiment but appearances were apparently deceptive.

"It's not often that I make a mistake in a face," said Colin, "but it seems I have done so this time. I thought to find a companion whose tastes might be the same as my own, I thought we might be of use to each other. All you've done is to sit deep in chatter about a woman and now I have to hear about your honour. Honour! By God's elbow, it sticks in my gullet. I'll have no truck with that sort of nonsense and I'll leave you to brood on your wrongs."

"Don't go!" answered François quickly. "Perhaps I was only acting, somewhat over-excited, when I talked in that way. You see, it's a weakness of mine that I like to hear myself talk, but it only gets out of hand when I am drunk. I seldom have the money to get properly drunk and so it is a very little weakness."

"A mealy-mouthed troubadour couldn't hold a candle to you in that mood," muttered Colin.

François asked himself why this stranger was taking such an interest in him, but as he stared, and tried to think, the question faded away. The wine was fast overcoming what wits he had left, and calling for water he washed his face and head vigorously with the inside of his gown until he felt more himself. His first thought was a sense of his own impotence and he hurriedly explained that the affair cut deeper than appeared.

"Although I am a fool to worry about her, she is the only woman

of my own class with whom I have been familiar. I'm one to avoid dinners and social gatherings. Women in company make me feel awkward and constrained. It's difficult to talk of the weather when you've got your eye on the bulge of a woman's breasts. I prefer a laugh or a curse and company that speaks its thoughts aloud. And the younger set laugh at my poverty, as did those two popinjays this evening. But I have sometimes envied them and hated my own darned clothes and general air of shabby scrape-for-a-copper."

Colin was content to listen again and François muttered that he thought there was the reason for his obsession. "I'm a poor relation, close enough to see the sweets but with no money to buy them. She's rich and I'm not, and that's really why I want her."

"A better reason than I had hoped for," said Colin, "and perhaps your taste in women will change. For myself, I'm concerned about no particular woman and never shall be. You can get satisfaction from any woman and find almost as much pleasure in one as in any of the others, the only difference being that some are stronger and more passionate."

"Professor Colin de Cayeux!" said François. "Graduated in the Faculty of Love! Lectures nightly and anywhere so long as there's a drink to be had! Love-letters written at moderate fee."

"Laugh as much as you like, for I'm glad to see you can laugh," said Colin. "But it's of no importance. We were just about to touch on the question of money, without which no woman at all can be had. What are your chances of getting enough to seduce this Catherine, what is your particular talent?"

"Nothing at all, Colin, except a certain facility in spending money and the gift of stringing together verses of poetry."

Colin pretended to shudder.

"There's no money in that, boy, and I should confine myself to Aristotle. He'll be more useful than poetry in the long run. I know what I'm talking about because I'm a clerk myself. Yes, I am. There's no need to grin all over that ugly face of yours. Here's my tonsure to prove it."

"False tonsures are not unknown in Paris."

"But mine's a true one, François. I am nearly thirty now and so I got my degree nine years ago. Believe me, I shall always scrape up a copper to pay some rascally thieving barber the price of a haircut. If you value your skin at all, get your position in Holy Orders well established. When a man is due to stand with the rope hanging in a noose over his head, then the Church is a good friend."

"I don't know why you talk of such things!" said François,

regarding Colin attentively. "My uncle will get me a nice, fat living in some comfortable parish. You must hear me preach!"

"There's a hangdog look about you that won't suit a cassock," answered Colin. "But that is not the point. You or I or both of us may be dead next year. There's no time like the present for making money. If you were put in the way of earning a little, I expect you would be grateful?"

"In an honest way, I suppose you mean?" asked François.

Colin scratched one of his large ears and his long, drooping body seemed to leer cynically at such a question.

"It's safe enough," he answered at last. "And you need to sow your wild oats before you become a priest. A priest's life is very cramped——"

"Still more cramped in a noose," interjected François, "and it doesn't last nearly so long."

Colin's cold gaze was probing François carefully. He saw that, even when fuddled with drink, the student was not the blustering sort to be easily led into danger. But, looking at that wide, loose mouth and the hungry look of the boy, Colin judged that he would follow his passions, nose to the ground, wherever they were directed. He poured the student out another drink and then said casually that there was one thing he valued more than his shaved head and that was his father's trade.

"A locksmith is a useful man," Colin said, "and you may be sure I've taken care to learn all my father could teach me. I could help you in your difficulty with this Catherine if I made a duplicate key to the door of your uncle's house. A serenade, although getting out of fashion, still goes down well. Perhaps you haven't tried this because you can't get out at night?"

"My uncle always makes fast the door at night and takes the key upstairs to put under his pillow," answered François, giving Colin another sly, careful look of appraisal. "Not that he has any idea I'd like to get out!"

"With my duplicate key, François, you'd be able to come and go with your uncle none the wiser."

François gave no answer for a moment, as he carefully poured himself more wine. Then he asked Colin why he was suggesting this when previously he had sneered at mention of Catherine.

"Oh, you may as well get it off your chest," said Colin, with an airy flourish of his large, capable hand. "The fact is I've taken a fancy to you. And I know the ideal man to help you with the serenading, a little busybody of a man called Guy Tabary. He's ready to do anything for me and, as he gets a deal of applause in the taverns, he's a good enough singer for your purpose. The

street will be dark and the girl won't know it isn't you bellowing your guts out down there."

But François suddenly remembered that it was late and his uncle would be crazed with anxiety.

"I must go," he said, jumping to his feet.

"Try some Anjou or Burgundy for a change," said Colin.

But François said he had work to do and broke away, stumbling against the other customers in his sudden eagerness. Colin called out that he could always be found by inquiring for his father. "At the sign of the Keys in the rue des Porées, a house well known to everybody," he said.

His voice trailed off behind, lost in the clatter of the tavern. Outside was a sort of luminous dusk, a darkness half-lit by a clear sky and many stars, but coming suddenly from the lights François was left groping in pitchy blackness. For some moments he felt his way along the walls of the houses, allowing the cool air and the stillness to quieten his tired brain, and once standing still to watch the cool stars, wondering at their remoteness. The sense of infinity recalled a thought often in his mind. That the town of Paris was a very little thing in space and all its inhabitants, alive or long since dead, were much of a muchness. Their time had come or would soon come: none could last much longer than another and all their dust would look alike in the ground. But the serious lift of his thoughts was always easily diverted. There was no time to lose, however little his life might seem in relation to the stars, and he hurried across the street to his uncle's house, trying in vain to think of some excuse for his lateness.

His hand was on the latch, and gently pushing the heavy door, and bolting it behind him, he passed into the study, where he found his uncle asleep in front of the dying fire. The attitude of patient waiting and the anxious lines of his face, even when sleeping, were typical of the man. His life for the last twelve years has been devoted to me, thought François, and small return he's likely to get for it. But I did not ask him to pick me out of the gutter. It was my mother who asked, hoping to see me in the scarlet robes of a cardinal.

But he could hardly keep his eyes open and, realising that he would have to go to bed or fall asleep over the fire, he lurched to his feet and found his way upstairs, with barely the strength left to take off his clothes.

CHAPTER II

It seemed that his eyes were hardly shut before he was awakened by the rattle of rings as Marthe, their servant, drew the curtains sharply from across the window of his room, telling him that it was time he got up. The downrightness of the woman had annoyed him for months past and, as soon as he had got the sleep out of his eyes, François answered that he would get up when he felt inclined. But Marthe, a sturdy, rosy-cheeked Breton woman, was in fighting mood that morning and, arms akimbo, spoke fiercely of the worry he had been causing his uncle.

"You'll find no better master in the whole of France," she cried. "I'll not stand by with my tongue between my teeth and see the life worried out of him by an ungrateful boy with the cradle marks still on his backside. I'm only a servant, but I've been so long with the master that he's more like a brother or a son to me and, by the Blessed Mary, I am sorry for the part I played when he was asked to adopt you. If I hadn't dried up his dinners, forgotten to heat his wine, and made myself generally disagreeable, he would never have roused himself to take you into his house. But for me, you would never have known that jaw-breaking Latin you and the master gabble for hours on end."

François began to tell her to mind her own business, but Marthe had had her say and cut him short, saying that the master wanted to see him at once. "He'll be waiting for you in his study," she said: and as she left the room she did not forget to leave the door ajar, so that the draught would soon move him from under the bedclothes.

Marthe was becoming a disagreeable old woman through her devotion to Guillaume, but he could not relish gratitude when it was thrown up in his face as a duty. And as he plunged his aching head in the wash-jug he envied the man he had met the night before. Colin would never be worried by family ties or sentiment of any kind, and he would say: Every man for himself and to the Devil with sentiment. It was a pleasing doctrine, for when gratitude and duty are opposed to a man's instinct, then nature must surely triumph.

He guessed that he was in for a lecture, a reproof that was justified, but the servant's attitude had aroused his resentment

and he decided that at least he would tell his uncle that he could not be expected always to find contentment in discussing the merits of rhymed and unrhymed Latin.

But François had not had time to finish his dressing before there came a tap at his door and his uncle entered the room.

Although Guillaume de Villon had a proper clerical swell under his cassock he was the scholarly type of priest, with a refined, thoughtful face, rather near-sighted from much poring over missals and books. But the wrinkled, deep-brown eyes were kindly: there was none of the intellectual hardness of the scholar in them that denotes an intelligence cut off from human feeling, and perhaps there were signs that he was a man inclined to take the troubles of other men too much to heart. There was an anxious, peering expression just behind his eyes, especially noticeable when he looked at François. His brow was high and well-moulded and, although his hair was naturally cut in the clerical tonsure, what hair he had was soft and snowy-white. The delicacy of his skin might have been envied by a lady of fashion and the colour in his cheeks was the pink that comes to an old man from clean, contented living: so different from the blotched, angry purple usually to be seen in the faces of the hard-drinking clergy. Although sixty-five years old, and a scholar, he had not given himself up entirely to study and the hours of recreation spent in his garden were reflected in his alert springy walk.

But his manner that morning was very diffident, it was almost as if he expected the reproof from François, and he began to apologise for disturbing his nephew.

"Sit down, sir," said François. "There's the table, the oak clothes-chest, or a stool: regal comfort for a scholar, as Jean de Conflans would say. I was just coming down to you, sir."

Guillaume sat on the stool and then immediately got up again and crossed to the window, where he stood looking out, hands behind his back. François shrugged his shoulders, a bored expression on his face, and silently continued his toilet.

"François, why did you go to bed last night without any supper?" said the canon.

François pulled his doublet straight, regarded himself in the small piece of glass that served as a mirror, and said there was no point in waking his uncle.

"And I was not hungry, uncle," he said, passing his hand across his mouth to hide a sly grin. "I had supped well."

"True, I was asleep by then, but I want to tell you what I was thinking about before I dropped off," said Guillaume, still staring out of the window. "It came into my mind to remember the day

your mother first came to this house. That was twelve years ago, in 1440, but all sense of time was suspended for me. I looked at the past as if in a crystal."

"The contemplative life must give you a gift for reverie, sir," muttered François, brushing his hair.

"I saw myself sitting in my study, with Marthe ushering in a woman I had never seen before and I at once had a premonition that my life was about to be altered. It was your mother and she asked me to stand foster to her fatherless boy."

"A shock for a celibate priest!"

"A shock indeed, François, and I can tell you that I was struck into silence. Your mother also took fright, but soon she began to embroider her story and told me that her husband, my brother, had died nine years before. Since then, she had struggled to make both ends meet, satisfied if enough money could be gotten to keep you out of the streets. She spoke of the years of misery Paris had suffered with the English inside and robbers outside the walls, and hungry wolves loping along the Seine."

"Those wolves!" said François. "I used to go with my mother to look at them but not beyond the gates of the town. Mother was frightened of the wolves but I was busy looking to see if there was one amongst them who had lost his tail. The man at the gate told us to look out for Courtault, a big wolf, fiercest of the lot, who had somehow lost his tail. For years I longed to see Courtault but never did."

"Smallpox, too, was killing off half the citizens," said Guillaume, "and on all sides your mother had seen neighbours stretch themselves out to die, asking God if too few candles had been burned or masses offered up, and there had seemed nothing else she could do but fall down with them. But the poor woman struggled on for your sake and fell down only to pray to the Good Mary. And she did not doubt that the news came straight from the Holy Mother when she heard that her dead husband's brother had become a priest in the quarter of Saint-Benoît."

"But I expect you doubted it, uncle," said François.

"It was my selfishness made me doubt," answered Guillaume. "I thought that God was asking too much of me and asked why a man could not be left in peace even when he was devoting his life to God's service. Your mother said that her son would soon make himself useful about the house and that the gardener would be sure to welcome help, and there was much to be done to help the monks, straw to put down in winter and grasses in summer. Even the higher tasks fit for a clerk, such as the copying of legal documents, might not be beyond her son, for she had heard his teacher say that,

given half a chance, he would be as learned as the Pope. She said that your teacher was an unfrocked Carmelite."

"I remember the stinking old rascal," said François. "He taught me how to drink wine!"

"I was scornful when I heard of him," said Guillaume, "and took no notice of your mother when she meekly said that an occasional pot of wine was all she could afford to pay for her son's education. Her meekness irritated and drove me to anger and the abrupt assertion that the matter needed much thought. I told her that Marthe should be sent with my decision."

"And I expect you sat wondering if you could get a benefice outside the walls of Paris," said François.

"I must confess that was in my mind," answered Guillaume. "As he lay on his death-bed, it could not be imagined that one thought of his younger brother crossed his mind and yet, from beyond the grave, his voice asked that I should adopt his son, either for love of God or love of my brother."

"An unreasonable request," muttered François.

"So it appeared to me," said Guillaume. "I thought of the many discords in my life with a boy about the house, climbing over the furniture and plucking my manuscripts from the shelves. The least of his pranks would be to run all over the cloisters, pestering the monks so that complainants would always be knocking at my door. I almost believed that I could hear their querulous voices in my ear. Then I saw that I should have to give up teaching in the law-schools so that I could make my adopted son fit for University. Above all, I regretted the long years spent in study and the times I had gone knocking at the doors to beg money for books and food. If it was my lot to care for my brother's child, why was it necessary to make me a priest? The thing could have been done better had I been a lawyer or soldier or courtier, anything but a priest, than whom no man seemed less fitted."

"You must have questioned the intentions and methods of God."

"For the moment, I did," said Guillaume. "I consoled myself by saying that the ways of God are unfathomable. But the conflict between my sense of comfort and my conscience went on for days, until at last I believed I heard the voice of God advising me in my uncertainty."

Shyness and a reluctance to speak sacred thoughts intensified the worried look on the priest's face, and his discourse was confused as he reminded François that his adoption had followed, and his mother too had been put under the protection of the religious community of the Celestins.

François had stayed quiet for some time, only tapping his hand impatiently on the oak chest, but here he jumped to his feet and took up his gown. This movement and the sight of his listener's sullen face brought back Guillaume's presence of mind.

"Don't mistake me, François," he cried. "I'm not telling you this because I expect or deserve gratitude. It is doubtful if one man can expect gratitude from another, for are we not all instruments in the hand of God? I wanted to remind you that it may have been fated I should save you from a probable early death. If you now throw away the benefits I have been able to give you, you will be wasting the destiny God intended for you."

François forgot his resentment, being left with no word of answer in his mouth, but Guillaume rid him of embarrassment by saying that in the past he had had no reason to complain of his conduct.

"You are inclined to extremes, working hard at your books for a fortnight, finding little time even to eat your food, and then passing the next week in idleness," said Guillaume. "But you have done well enough and should pass your master's degree with ease. Yet, if great preferment in the Church is to be had, you must pass on to one of the other Faculties for more study. Above all, good conduct is essential if you are to receive those letters of nomination at the end of your schooling without which no appointment in Orders is possible. And I have thought that lately you must have got mixed up with the students in those ridiculous brawls over the boundary stones of Mlle. de Bruyères. These students are preparing rods for their own backs, François. Church and University will soon tire of their pranks and become hard put to defend their unreasonable commotions."

François glossed over the first part of his uncle's talk, muttering that maybe it was God's will he should have been adopted, and turned his answer to the second part, assuring Guillaume that he thought the students fools to carry on as they were doing. And there flashed into his mind an excuse for his lateness in coming home and, without further consideration, he told of his difficulty in working in his little room as the cries of the hawkers in the streets below made concentration impossible.

"Their lungs must be made of leather," he said. "All day they cry their wares and yet, when I am home in the evenings, their howls are just as strong as in the early morning. If it's not fresh grapes or mustard or vinegar or sauce, they'll be crying: 'My cheese, the best cheese from Brie!' And that cry will soon be obscured by the melancholy drone of 'Any old rags or bones'; and so they go on, almonds and cabbages and pastries and apples and oranges and

pears and lavender and the crier of hot baths, all shouting one against the other, until I, up here in my room, begin to wonder if they've all gone mad. And so, uncle, I have got into the habit of going into some quiet church or another after schools and there I can study, by the light of the candles, in peace."

The lie did not sound convincing to François but Guillaume was well satisfied, saying that he ought to have been told, and agreeing that the quietness of a church must be conducive to deep study. And, taking François affectionately by the arm, the canon changed the conversation with evident relief and led his nephew to the window.

"This small community of ours must seem dull to a young man at times, but it is my life," said Guillaume de Villon. The wave of his hand embraced the small intimate cloister of Saint-Benoît, with the tiny houses clustered round the collegiate church and the trim circle of grass and trees; the vegetable gardens and the flowers, and the neat graves of the monks under the arched cloisters.

"The beauty of Paris, too, is a sight of which I never weary," said Guillaume. "I often thank God that he allows me to pass my days in such a pleasant spot; and that he gives me the love of a good son is more that I deserve. We have been very happy here, François, and if at times a doubt comes to me, it is that I am selfish in asking you to share the quietness of this place. The path of your life may be elsewhere. Sometimes I feel that you have had no chance to make up your mind, but if you come to receive great preferment in the Church, then I shall die a happy man."

François lacked heart to speak his own doubt and then there came to him a proper view of his uncle's face. He saw that the canon was getting an old man, at a time of life when death comes to be regarded closely and pondered as the inevitable end. He has staked his whole life on me, thought François. Should I fail him, then it may be that his faith, both in God and in himself, will be shattered, his long, patient, and unselfish life broken.

But he could not imagine his uncle's state of mind were his dreams destroyed. The reactions of a dreamer are incalculable. But he did know that the responsibility resting on his own shoulders was oppressive. Why should the lives of us be so linked the one with the other? A man's slightest and most unconsidered action may serve to break the serenity of his neighbour or even cause his death, and it was a pity that greater independence both of spirit and of action was not generally possible. Saints ran away into the desert so that they might hear themselves speak to God, and even then came vexatious thoughts of mankind to disturb their meditations. Man could never completely escape from man, but surely

his life was his own to live? Then selfish thoughts faded from his mind as he looked at his uncle's face and, standing looking out over the cloister, François was ready to swear that his own life should ever after be subject to the priest's worthy ambition.

Never before had they been so close in spirit: the unspoken greeting was heard by them both but Guillaume spoke at last, saying, with a nervous laugh, that they stood staring into space like muezzins who greet the dawn, the difference being that in their case the dawn had gone these many hours and it was time François set out for the schools.

The spell was broken by his voice but the mood of solemnity was still on François as he passed out into the street, and the significance of that moment on the balcony was to remain in his mind for many days. But the sense of oppression was also there, for he had been too long quiet. The dirty lecture-room would be unbearable that day and he decided to miss his lectures and seek distraction in the narrow streets of the town, choosing to turn left down the rue Saint-Jacques to the Little Bridge.

This spot, the busiest in Paris, was a favourite with him, and his long, pale face was often to be seen there, gazing at the crowds hurrying over the wooden bridge. It had always been his pleasure to watch others. Even when he was an urchin, rushing ragged about the streets of the town, he had loved to stare at the citizens, guessing at their lives and thoughts, and wandering into all the corners of the town in pursuit of his fancies. And on that morning in early February, with a winter sun shining on the town to give sign of the spring which all hoped would soon be at hand, the Little Bridge was at its liveliest, shaking with the tramp of many feet. The houses on either side the bridge made sight of the water impossible but the sound of it swirling underneath was loud and fierce, the thaw having broken the ice that morning.

A quack was making himself heard over the din and, even when a cart clattered past, his shrill voice could be heard explaining to a small crowd of doubting housewives that the stain-remover he was selling would infallibly take stains of all sorts off carpets and clothes. Even silk, he said, could be cleaned with no damage to the fabric, and he demonstrated its excellence time and again on a small piece of carpet he held in his hand. The women began to be swayed by his eloquence and the hawker, seeing François stare, gave him a slow wink as much as to say: "See how easy it is to find simpletons even in a town like Paris." But the man's satisfaction was short-lived, for there came along a showman leading a learned pig and began to tell the women of great wisdom possessed by the creature, promising them it would tell their fortunes for a copper if they

would but follow him a little way down the road, where the show was just about to begin. He so worked on their curiosity that the quack was left without a single customer and was forced to run down the street after them, cursing women who wasted their time on ignorant fellows who would only deceive them, when good value for their money might be got with him.

As François watched the bustle of the life he so loved, he poised in his mind his love for Guillaume and the strength of the desires then beginning to trouble him. Was he to deny them for sake of his uncle's ambition? How long was he to browse amongst dreary books and work up an understanding of the rules of logic and the dry bones of rhetoric, and even teach the Word of God, when he instinctively felt that no man could teach another wisdom?

He caught the eye of a harlot and, with a sly glance at him, the woman bent as if to tie her shoe and at the same time pulled down the front of her dress to allow him a full view of her swinging, naked breasts. But for his lack of money he would have followed her, and such abstinence could not be called virtue. He saw that the solution was in the hand of Colin de Cayeux. He would accept the offer to make a duplicate key to his uncle's house and, if he was careful, nobody would discover his wanderings. His uncle must be kept in ignorance, his own future in the Church need not be put in jeopardy, and afterwards he could settle down to a priesthood and comfortable living.

He was pleased to have made up his mind so easily, and although there was a slight irk in his mind, either of conscience or fear, his uncle was forgotten when he crossed over the road to join a crowd watching the fight between a drunken porter and a gypsy. François was soon laughing and cheering with the rest of them, for he was very ready to forget the unpleasant or anything at all that was likely to interfere with his own desires.

CHAPTER III

COLIN DE CAYEUX had spoken the truth when he told François that he lived with his father in the rue des Porées, although it was strange to hear such a hard-bitten fellow speak of himself as living with his father. Filial devotion was not a likely virtue of that cadaverous, sophisticated man and in fact it would have been more exact to say that Colin's father lived with him.

The young Colin de Cayeux had always been one of the rowdiest young men in Paris. At school, there was not another of the boys to stand up to him. He toughened himself with a daily fight or some wild escapade against authority, and he was soon to become a natural leader of one of the gangs of boys who were up to every sort of devilment in the streets of Paris. It was a wild, turbulent period and these gangs of boys were not the least violent symptom of the times. They stole systematically from the pastrycooks and tripe-shops. They organised raids on the grape-vines and orchards and hen-roosts. They even robbed the vegetable gardens, selling the vegetables in the open market. They chased servant-girls and several cases of rape could be put down to these boys. They thrashed everybody weaker than themselves, sometimes even grown men. They affected the grown-up manners of the men they admired in the taverns, ruffling and swaggering in the streets with the best of them. They even achieved the distinction of being preached against from the pulpit, a mark of notoriety that naturally only increased their insolence.

But in Colin there had always been a large streak of caution and hardheadedness. He liked dissolute living. He liked to live easily, without hard work. He liked to match his wits against authority, the authority that denied him the luxurious living for which he craved. Above all, he liked to direct the activities of his companions. He was no behind-the-scenes conspirator: the van of the fight would be his whenever it was necessary to risk the leader's skin. But his chief pleasure was to lead, and he intended to lead for as long as possible. Too often had he seen men swinging from the many gibbets in the Paris streets, even young boys of ten or twelve. Some protection was needed and he knew this could come only from the Church.

It was not impossible for the lay authority to hang a clerk, but it was very difficult. The Church regarded even its most juvenile member with a jealous eye, and was careful of its own privilege of trying its own criminals in its own courts almost with its own law. Any clerk arrested by the Provost of Paris could reckon on being reclaimed by the Church, even on the grave charges of sacrilege or murder. This might happen three or four times to the same man, and it was only after the last occasion that the laymen stood much chance of reclaiming the clerk as "incorrigible." Colin reckoned that he could live comfortably for a good many years if he could allow himself the luxury of three or four mistakes, and so it was on his persuasion that the locksmith sent his son to the University.

There Colin soon found choice companions who were much to his liking, but he was careful to do enough work to be given his

degree and so secure his position in minor orders. Then, his purpose accomplished, Colin said good-bye to learning with a light heart, and first proceeded to secure complete domination over his father. This was a good craftsman but a weak old man, fond of the bottle, secretly afraid of his own son, and he was soon swayed to Colin's purpose. This was to work up a respectable connection in the day-time and turn his talent with keys and locks to more profitable purpose after curfew.

Colin had for long known what he intended to do. Years before he left the University he planned to become one of the Coquillards. The Coquillards, or Brothers of the Coquille, was a vast organisation that spread all over the country and covered every sort of crime: graduating from pilfering and simple robbery through burglary and blackmail and coining to murder and the taking of orders for political assassination. It had its headquarters at Dijon, an elaborate system of communication, and a jargon of its own that no outsider could hope to understand. The Coquillards were recruited from every class: disbanded soldiers, false pilgrims, workmen who had no work, innkeepers, pimps, beggars, brothel-keepers, tramps, gypsies, the many sellers of false pardons from the Pope, unfrocked priests and friars, the hawkers of imitation jewellery and loaded dice, vagabonding clerks and coiners of false money. All these and many more were amongst the Brothers of the Coquille. Men of high rank did not disdain to be in their pay, for the pickings to be had were large and the chances of the King ever being powerful enough to destroy such a body seemed small.

Colin realised that something on a large scale was needed to afford scope to the qualities he knew he had: ruthlessness, courage, brains, and quickness, combined with an insatiable itch for rich living. These Coquillards were the very men, and in the nine years since he left the University he had risen high in their ranks and become one of the acknowledged leaders of the Paris section. But, so far, he had never had to call on the Church for help. Those three or four cards were still held carefully up his sleeve. And even his general reputation stood fairly high. It was known that he spent most of his time in drinking and wenching around all the taverns in Paris: the Trumilières, the Crosse, the Abreuvoir Popin, the Trou Perrette, the Pomme de Pin, and literally a hundred others of the four thousand reputed to be in the town. Especially was he to be found in the house of fat Margot, which stood on the island behind the Cathedral of Notre-Dame. There consorted all his special friends: Regnier de Montigny, Brother Baude de la Mare, Little Jean, Jean the Wolf, Tricot, Casin Cholet, Perrenet, Guy

Tabary, Dom Nicolas, and Jean Rosay. Bad as was the reputation of these, many of them were ex-scholars of the University, in minor orders, and as Colin always had plenty of money to fling about, wherever he went, the curious restrained their questions, decided his father must have a very good business, and voted Colin the best of good fellows.

But Colin himself was never known to forget his secret trade, careless as he sometimes appeared, and as soon as he saw François he had realised that the student might be useful to him. The Coquillards in Paris had recently lacked an informer to make their robberies consistently successful. Most of the money in Paris had found its way into the coffers of Church or University, much the same thing, and those were the most carefully guarded. Living in the midst of the University quarter, mingling freely with the grave churchmen, François Villon was in an ideal position to hand on discreet information and nobody would guess the source of the leakage.

Colin realised that he would have to tread carefully with François or else scare him away. He would have to be got well within the toils before any hint was given of their use for him. But Colin had sufficient faith in his own judgment to send word to Margot not to expect him for some days. He stayed quietly at home in his father's house, not wishing to miss François Villon when he paid the expected visit to the rue des Porées.

Sure enough, a few days later, François came knocking hurriedly at the door of his house with a key in his hand. He thrust it into Colin's hand.

"Hurry!" he cried. "The old man has gone for a walk. He said not to expect him back before curfew, but if he does come back, unexpectedly, then there's no doubt Marthe will miss the key from its nail near the door as she fusses round him in the hall!"

Colin leaned his long body over François, his blue eyes glinting under the bushy black eyebrows.

"I thought you would come. I am glad to see you," he said.

He then led the way into his workroom and set to work on his task methodically and skilfully. And as he bent over his work he said that François was lucky to find him in. "I'm usually out in one tavern or another at this time, with some of my many friends."

"And not often at the Mule, I'll be bound," said François, pulling aside the oiled silk over the window and glancing nervously into the street.

"You're right there," said the locksmith's son, hammering and beating his metal. "I like more exhilarating company than we found that evening and I hope to be able to show you something of

it. I have thought of you often since we met, although I can't imagine why it should be your face that drifts in my memory any more than any other of the students. But you stand to gain by it."

"All I want at the moment is that key——"

"Nobody in Paris could make it so quickly, unless it is Little Jean, a friend of mine," cried Colin. And he went on to remind François of the serenade they were going to try outside Catherine's house.

"The details you can leave to me," Colin said. "Make it to-morrow evening at ten sharp. There will be a half-moon, giving enough light to show us the way and not enough to make us conspicuous. We can meet at the Mule, as we shall only want to drink enough to keep out the cold and the Mule is near the rue Mont-Sainte-Geneviève, where I believe you said she lives."

The key was finished and Colin handed it over, saying that François was to be sure to oil the locks and hinges and then he would be able to glide out of the house as surely and quietly as a ghost. And, as he opened the door for François, Colin said that he hoped the moon would be showing on the night of the serenade, for he believed it had a strong influence on women.

But the moon was obscured by fleeting clouds when Colin left the rue des Porées to pick up Guy Tabary on the night of the expedition and, wondering if this was a portent of disaster, they made their way to the Mule, where they found François uneasily waiting.

"Ah, the key worked well!" said Colin. "This is the man for the job to-night, François. Guy Tabary, the nightingale of Paris! He has a voice able to charm a Mother Superior to your bed should such a strange fancy take you!"

Guy Tabary nodded his head and smiled rather foolishly, full of self-importance. He was a portly little fellow, with a round, pleasant face and twinkling brown eyes, who, as he sat with his head tilted to one side gently plucking at the strings of his lute, inevitably called to mind a robin waiting for crumbs.

Colin could see that François was suspicious of the company he was in and, knowing that Guy Tabary's simplicity would have a more reassuring effect on François than his own presence, he made some excuse about the bill and sought out the landlord. As soon as he had left the table Guy Tabary told François how lucky he was that Colin should be taking an interest in him. He was a man well worth knowing, although perhaps not such good company as some of the others.

"You should hear Brother Baude de la Mare talking about wine," cried Tabary, "and Regnier de Montigny, who is of noble family, telling us scandal of the great people. But none can hold a candle

to Colin in business. He's got a rare business head on him and can hold more drink and yet keep his wits about him better than any man in town. One weakness only he has got, and that is that there are occasions when his temper takes him outside himself. But he knows what he wants and generally never lets anything stand in his way."

"He's obviously a man you wouldn't expect to find nursing a baby," said François. "He probably left us together so that you would sing out his praises. But in what work is he assisted by Regnier de Montigny and so many choice friends?"

Tabary took a deep draught of Alicante, evidently wondering how to avoid the awkwardness of the question, and, with an air of importance, he finally answered that the business was many-sided, best for Colin himself to tell him about it. Not a word more could François learn, although he could see that the effort needed to keep silence was great, and it was only fear of Colin that held back the boasts and the tales of nightly adventures all jostling each other for expression in Tabary's mind. François could not then liken Tabary to a robin redbreast, he was more like a cat after a shower of rain as he sat rolling his drink on his tongue, thinking regretfully of the impression he could have made on this young novice with his tales of Regnier and Colin and Brother Baude, all great men in his view, with himself sharing a reflection of their glory. But whilst the conflict between his fear and his conceit was still undecided, Colin was back, asking why they sat dumb as mutes and saying that it was time to be on the move. All three wrapped themselves tightly in their cloaks and regretfully left the warmth of the tavern, groping their way along the rue Saint-Jacques, turning off into the rue des Noyers and, passing the rue Saint-Jean-de-Beauvais and the rue des Carmes on their right, came to the rue Mont-Sainte-Geneviève, where stood the stone cross and the fountain.

"Now we must turn to the right here, up the rue Mont-Sainte-Geneviève," said François, "and take a small turning on the left, I forget its name, which leads down by the side of the College of Navarre, and the house is not far from there. It's a large house standing on a corner——"

"There it is," said Colin, "with a light shining in one of the upper rooms."

"Her father is an ecclesiastic of high standing, Colin, strong enough to ignore regulations, and the light comes from Catherine's bedroom. I know that because, in one of her teasing moods, she pointed it out to me, saying that I should know where to go when the right time came and asking if I would like her to undress with

the light arranged so that I could admire the shadow of her naked figure."

Colin muttered profanities against women who aroused passion simply for the pleasure of frustrating it and then pointed out a tree near the balcony which would allow an easy climb into her bedroom. "And now, Guy, slip over in the shadow of that tree and start your caterwauling," said Colin. "Sing as if you had to make the gargoyles of Notre-Dame look human. François and I will wait in the shadows this side of the street and watch for sign of life from that window."

Midnight would soon be called and the silence of the town was uncanny. A town silence is not as the silence of the country. A forest at night seems quiet, but gradually little unknown sounds creep into a listener's consciousness until the whole forest murmurs in a deep voice, but the nightly stillness of a town is a dead silence and oppressive. And François thought that most women would be much startled were they woken out of sleep by a voice, however pleasant, crying their praises in the deadness of that night but, as he turned to Colin to whisper his doubts, Guy Tabary began a song to the accompaniment of his own lute.

His voice was not unduly raised but the noise of it sounded like a bell in that silence. François expected to hear windows thrown open and voices crying out in anger, but the gentle rhythm of the notes went unchallenged and he began to take heart as he listened to Tabary's soft tenor voice.

"You can take it the thing's as good as done," said Colin, blowing on his hands. "A serenade is a ridiculous sort of affair for me to be mixed up in, I'd want no word of it to go round the taverns, but anything is justified so long as it's successful. I thought I heard a furtive movement up on that balcony and the light has certainly gone out in her room. You can imagine yourself lying in bed naked by her side!"

As he spoke, the clouds cleared away from the moon and, although it showed the balcony was still deserted, advantage was taken of a pause in Tabary's singing to tell him that they believed the moment was almost come, he was to continue but must sing softly in case Catherine wished to speak. François was posted by the singer so that he could answer the expected summons, and even he, sceptical as he was of the whole proceedings, began to think that Catherine would surely speak to him.

But, of a sudden, Tabary's song and the quietness were broken by the cries of many men and there swept round the corner a roaring drunken rabble, calling on all the devils in hell and asking whence came this hullabaloo kept up outside the houses of honest women.

Windows were then indeed thrown open and the frightened householders looked timidly down on the students out on the loose again, only to retire hurriedly to the comfort of their own beds when mud and stones were thrown at the windows. Meanwhile the rowdies fell to dancing wildly around Colin, François, and Guy Tabary, despite assurances that they were maltreating one of their own fraternity, for they were too drunken to recognise the Rector had he been outside Catherine's house that night.

"Make them salute our stone," cried one man. And the three of them were hustled down the street towards the montagne Sainte-Geneviève, François telling Colin that it was useless to struggle.

"They are taking us to salute the boundary stone they stole from Mlle. de Bruyères. I forgot how near we should be to these idiots to-night."

But the cries of the students and the noise of the flutes and bagpipes they were playing made it impossible for François to hear himself speak and he gloomily set out to endure the rough treatment he was getting. Soon they came to the montagne Sainte-Geneviève, when the students suddenly left them, having spied a sergeant of the watch taking shelter from them in a doorway farther down the street. Sight of this higher quarry drove all thought of the three prisoners from their capricious minds and the three of them, left alone, stood watching the scholars journeying erratically down the street; Colin gently cursing as he felt himself to see if he was still whole, whilst Guy Tabary stood bemoaning the loss of his lute, which had got crushed in the struggle.

"A better instrument than ever I've had before," he said, "as delicate as an eggshell and now broken."

But François stood still and dumb, nor paid attention when Colin said that, as they had been on the point of success, there was no reason why they should not go back. "Why don't you answer me, François?" he cried.

François still seemed far away and they began to think that he had come on a knife-wound, but at last he found his tongue and said it was no use going back.

"As we were carried away I looked up at the balcony, and there was Catherine dressed in a nightgown with a mantle thrown over her shoulders, and a man by her side, arm around her waist, both laughing at the predicament we were in. I know the man—Noël de Jolis—a brainless fop but coming from a moneyed family. And so we were providing musical entertainment whilst another man enjoyed Catherine. Many a joke must have been made at our expense. A man in bed with his mistress must find it amusing when another is fool enough to serenade outside her window."

This ridiculous ending to the serenade was too much for Colin, who could find relief only in damning Catherine and all her friends. His oaths stopped the lamentations of Guy Tabary and so the three of them finally stood in dejected silence, the stillness of the sleeping town broken only by the faint cries of the students far down the street, until Colin said there was no use François bothering any more about Catherine.

"If she has led you on as you say she has, then she ought to be whipped, but we can't bring that about. It might be risky to touch her if her father is powerful."

"I'm not going to jump into the Seine," said François, "but there's bound to be a little disappointment."

"Come with me and I'll show you the cure for disappointments," said Colin, with his wide, satyr-like grin. "You'll remember the promise I made on the night you mistook me for a pimp? I'll take you to the house of my dear friend, fat Margot herself. Her house is becoming one of the most prosperous in Paris, and well it deserves to be. Margot knows how to look after a man: the best drink, the best card-players, and the best women in Paris! And, as a friend of mine, it won't cost you a single denier."

Their pleadings were useless and Colin signed to Guy Tabary to make himself scarce. Disconsolately the little man slipped away into the shadows, still holding his shattered lute, and Colin took the student's arm. They walked in silence for some time, and then François giggled slightly and said that perhaps he was not in such despair as he felt he ought to have been.

"That's more the talk," cried Colin, slapping him on the back. "That's more like the choice companion I am sure you were meant to be. By God's liver, one woman to one man is a sin against nature."

"But it is a strange thing, for all that," said François, frowning. "For months, Catherine has been the centre of my thoughts, and now all hope of her has gone the world has not ended."

"It has just started for you, lad! You were not made for sighing after one skirt," said Colin.

A memory of Guy Tabary's face, a man born to be unlucky, came to both of them.

"That fool Tabary!" cried Colin.

They burst into raucous, uncontrollable laughter, Colin delightedly digging François in the ribs, until he remembered that the watch might be brought down upon them, asking what madmen it was stood lonely by the Seine at past midnight, laughing at nothing.

CHAPTER IV

COLIN arranged to meet François the next evening but, before going to Saint-Benoît, he searched out his friends and told them of his particular reason for requiring François to be very well treated. They realised the importance of securing such an excellent informer and promised to look after the scholar as if he were some rich pigeon, ready to be plucked. But a sudden instinct made Colin keep his plans from Margot herself, a chance for which he was afterwards very thankful. He told only Regnier de Montigny, Little Jean, Brother Baude de la Mare, Guy Tabary, and Dom Nicolas: the men directly in his confidence. He told Margot simply that he was bringing a friend who had been unlucky in a love-affair.

But François kept him waiting outside the red door of Guillaume de Villon's house so long that Colin began to think his nerve had failed. But at last the student's thin shadow slipped along the wall.

"The draughtiest corner in Paris!" said Colin, when they were out of hearing from the house. He rubbed his bony hands and drew Villon's arm through his own. "It must be the close proximity of the University professors, for I always found them chilly company. I'll need a good few draughts of Burgundy and a warm thigh pressed against mine to get this cold out of me!"

"I can hardly see you in this murk, Colin," said François. "I'm sorry to be late but my uncle's other nephew, Jean Flastrier, barber to the cloister, stepped round this evening. When those two get together there's no stopping them. I thought their clerical small-talk of choristers and descants would never stop. However, they dried up just in time."

"Is your uncle likely to go into your bedroom?"

"His candle flickered outside my door as he was going up to bed and I thought he was coming in. That gave me a fright, as I was fully dressed and only waiting to slip downstairs. But I stuffed some old cloaks under the bedclothes, making them look as much like a human body as I could," answered François.

"Good! Always take care, especially in the small things. That's where the danger is," muttered Colin.

He then fell silent, feeling his way carefully along the pitch-black streets. The footway, itself very rough and slippery, was littered

with stalls and benches, and no ordinary man could have got along without many a bruise, but Colin seemed to have the eyes of a cat.

At last the well-known shape of Notre-Dame loomed above them and Colin led the way round it. "Here's the house, right behind the cathedral, and none the worse for that," said Colin. "The gateway to all the pleasures."

They were met by a chorus of greetings from the men and women in the large room, drinking at the various long tables or gathered round the huge, open fire, but, with a casual wave of his hand, Colin pushed his way to another smaller room, solidly furnished and high-roofed, with some tables on the ground floor and others on a balcony that ran right round the room. This room too was pretty well filled, but Colin took François to a table in front of the fire in a central position at one end of the room and introduced him to his particular friends.

Of these, the chief was obviously Regnier de Montigny. François could readily believe that this man was of noble birth, as Guy Tabary had said. He was a cool, self-assured young man, expensively dressed in the height of fashion, with a beautifully cut velvet doublet, purple in colour, a black jerkin trimmed with white fur, supple, flop-over green leather boots, and a hat by his side cut in the new exquisite Italian manner. He was tall and slim, of a pale complexion, with dark, lively eyes and a wide, lazy grin. His eyebrows were strongly marked, he wore a short, pointed black beard, and his hair, cut rather long, was curly and unruly. His long white hands dealt the cards with a gambler's negligence but there was nothing effeminate about Regnier de Montigny, despite his casual manners and carefully turned-out appearance. Here was obviously a leader of men and one who would be in the forefront of any fight.

The next to catch the eye was the smallest man in the room: Little Jean. This was a man of a very different type, obviously a man of the street and the people. He was unobtrusively dressed and not much above five feet in height. His face was shrewdly wrinkled, of a hard-bitten appearance, with black, straight eyebrows and black, beady eyes with no depth in them, like those of a sea-gull. He had a habit of quick, abrupt movement. His hands especially he was unable to keep still and was continually on the fidget with them: rubbing them against his doublet, biting the nails, regarding his yellowing palms closely, and pulling the joints of the fingers with great cracking noises. He also had a habit of spitting in the fire or in the hearth with charming impartiality.

Between these two men, and contrasting grotesquely with both of them, sat Brother Baude de la Mare. He was a hairy, gross man

in a dirty monk's gown, with a piece of rope as girdle. He had a red, perspiring face, a fringe of thin, reddish, dishevelled hair, and tufts of hair growing out of his ears.

These three, with the help of the obliging Guy Tabary, his self-importance quite restored after the disastrous serenade, set out to make François feel at home and found the task not at all difficult. He was soon playing cards with Regnier de Montigny and Little Jean, whilst exchanging reminiscences of University with Brother Baude.

Regnier did not talk much, seeming to believe that he did enough by consenting to play cards with a novice, and Little Jean was not talkative by habit. But Brother Baude talked enough for the whole tavern, swearing that to drink was the only pleasure, and advising François to give up cards and women and turn to drink and the delights of conversation with a boon companion.

"I'll have them all," said François, stretching over to grab Baude's bottle of Anjou.

"A dirty trick, by the hairs of Bacchus himself!" cried the monk, ordering more wine. "And you delude yourself, my son, for no man can have them all. There's no man or devil in the shape of man who has talent enough to wench and to tipple and to gamble. To drink successfully is an art that demands a man's whole time."

"I should imagine you live up to that pretty well yourself, my holy father!" said François, grinning at the man's red face.

"I have never had the least difficulty," said Brother Baude, shrugging his broad shoulders. "I've always had these two gifts: an unquenchable thirst and an unconquerable aversion to all women. I was born with a salted herring down my throat!"

"It doesn't stop you talking, you old reprobate!" cried Denise, Colin's latest mistress, a small, plump girl with a pouting, red mouth and heavy-lidded, slit eyes. "You ought to know better at your age. What do you mean, too, by running down all the women? Wouldn't you hoist yourself into bed with me if you had the chance, reverend Father?"

"You speak to a man of God, my child," said Brother Baude, looking at her mildly. "You speak disrespectfully and your spirit avowedly needs chastising and purifying. I purify thee in the name of the Great Bacchus!"

And calmly he poured the flagon of Burgundy in his hand over the girl's head, soaking her from head to foot. Her thin dress clung to her body like a second skin, her pointed breasts and figure were plain for all to see, and she seemed like a rosy-hued Aurora rising above the waves.

She screamed a flood of vituperation at the monk, but he took

not the least notice and, picking up a partridge in both hands, he began to tear the bird with his strong, white teeth, throwing the bones over his shoulder. Suddenly the girl calmed down and shrugged her shoulders. She winked at François.

"What do you think of that, my scholar?" she said.

"Not much," said François. "Brother Baude mixes his theologies, bringing a pagan deity to the aid of God!"

"That, my son, is half the trouble with this world," said Baude. "There is no toleration for the other man's god——"

"Well, I'm not going to stand here catching cold whilst you argue about God, you old beast!" said Denise.

Quickly she stripped off all her clothes and, stepping fastidiously over the wet heap on the floor like a cat keeping its paws out of water, she reached for François Villon's gown to wrap round her naked body. After some argument he let her have the gown, and she remained seated by his side.

The incident seemed to be the signal for the room to let itself go. Voices rose shrilly, the wine began to flow more freely, rowdy songs broke out, and a gypsy girl began to dance on a table, singing one of her race's strange songs. The serving-maids were hard put to it to bring the orders and the cooks were continually changing the birds roasting on the spit in front of the open fire.

Colin de Cayeux was watching François carefully, whilst urging him on not to miss a single drink. The student's sallow complexion soon took on a hectic flush, his eyes sparkled and his whole body became live and animated. His wide nostrils quivered constantly, as if he would not even miss the smell of the goose sizzling on the spit, and when the girls came to his table he could not keep his eyes off their pink and white flesh, with the ripe breasts bulging out of the low-cut gowns, which were also pinched in tightly at the waist to show off the curve of their buttocks. Neither had he been in a hurry to let Denise have his gown to cover herself, preferring to feast his eyes on her small, plump body.

It was obvious that Colin need not have bothered himself to prepare a welcome for François. The student was quite capable of making himself at home. It was he who soon ousted Brother Baude from leading the talk and yet he did not appear to monopolise the table unduly. He seemed able to draw them all out on their special subject, and he was soon talking to Little Jean about cock-fighting, so that the little man cracked his finger-joints in an ecstasy of excitement; to Guy Tabary on the shops where the best lute-strings might be purchased; to Brother Baude on abstruse points of church ritual, causing the monk to drink rather absentmindedly; with Regnier de Montigny he discussed the merits of Toledo steel,

and Denise found herself telling him intimate secrets of her love-affairs, as she held his gown around her naked body. The house had never been so lively, and as Colin looked on the cause of their animation, his blue eyes sparkled under the dark eyebrows and he seemed to be hugging his long body in an access of secret joy.

Regnier was apparently the calmest of them all: he went on dealing the cards imperturbably and Colin, full of elation, crossed over to whisper in his ear:

"If all goes well, Regnier, I'll twist him round my finger, get out of him all we want and yet leave him perfectly contented. He has found his home here, did you ever know anybody settle down so quickly? He was born for us and, on top of that, he'll make our journey to the devil more cheerful."

"He has got a knack with him," answered Regnier, looking across at François.

The student had got up from his seat at the table and had been entertaining them all with a life-like imitation of Mad Pierre, a religious fanatic to be seen outside every church in Paris. He had been recounting the tale of the Prodigal Son, Pierre's favourite, in exactly the madman's shrill, piping voice, and applying the moral of the tale to all in-that house. He had climbed on a table, stuck straws from the floor in his hair, and even his eyes had taken on the madman's wild, gleaming stare.

At that moment they awaited the climax of the story with interested, grinning faces, some of them looking awestruck at such an uncanny imitation and some muttering of magic. Then, his eyes starting out of his head and the muscles of his neck distended like pieces of tight cord, François broke violently into his peroration, crying: "O, you blasphemers, spoilers, meddlers, thieves, cut-throats, bawds, lewd wantons! O, you strumpets, harlots, pigs, guzzlers, rascallions, cony-catchers, pestiferous scum! You have no rich fathers to give you shelter, so mend your ways before you are sent to writhe and roast in the fires of Hell!"

There was great applause for this performance but Regnier shrugged his shoulders. "Pretty enough," he said, "but don't expect him to back you up with fists or daggers if it should come to a fight!"

"I don't imagine he's the type to fight," answered Colin. "We don't want him for fighting. But he's sharp, he's quick, he's cunning, and he must have his pleasures. What more could we want? I'll wager his appetites are insatiable. Start him on the course he's bound to take in the end, whether we influence him or not, and he'll always be our man."

"Take care you don't find yourselves twisted round his finger,

my masters," said Little Jean, who had overheard their whispered talk. "It comes into my head that he's managing this house as if to the manner born and bred."

"Don't you fret, Jean, my boy," sneered Colin. "Confine yourself to picklocks and leave the thinking to your betters."

Little Jean spat expressively into the fire, but further talk was stopped by the entry of fat Margot herself, the proprietress of the tavern.

She was a woman near thirty, who would soon be running to excessive fat but whose full figure had not yet become blowsy and was in its prime, strong and curving, with big breasts and broad, firm hips. She was handsome after a blonde, Norwegian fashion, with a wide, sensuous mouth, flaxen hair, and blue eyes.

Colin signed to Denise to make room for the mistress of the house. The girl got up obediently and began to dress herself by the fire, immediately in front of François. She was making eyes at the student but he was staring at Margot.

"This is François Villon, a new companion," said Colin.

Margot looked at François and laughed, showing her even, white teeth. As she threw her head back, François noticed the soft down on her upper lip and the fullness of her lower lip. A shiver ran through his thin body and the sweat started out on his forehead and the palms of his hands.

"I have been listening to him," Margot said, in her deep, musical voice. "He likes to hear himself talk. What's more important in a house of this sort, other people like to hear him."

Colin noticed that for the first time François was without a word in his mouth and the long silence made him uneasy. Quickly he strove to set the talk going again, but in the midst of the laughter, and the rattle of dice and the shouts of the players, the student and Margot still sat quiet, as if entranced. When their attention had at last been distracted from each other, Colin whispered to François that it would be best to leave Margot alone.

"Margot's chastity is a standing joke with us," Colin said. "You will find her unapproachable, strange as it may seem."

François ran his hand through his hair and glared at Colin.

"I know," he said. "She's used to men of elegance like Regnier de Montigny. How should she notice an out-at-elbows student?"

"As long as you understand," said Colin, still uneasy. "But I'll arrange for your needs to be supplied."

At that, he called Margot over to him. "You remember me telling of the misery François has been made to suffer through Catherine de Vausselles?" Colin said. "A mean bitch of a woman

who kept us shivering in the cold when she was being ruffled by her lover in bed——”

“I’ve heard this before,” interjected Margot. “Is there any need for me to hear the twice-old story of your friend’s misfortune in love? What do you expect me to do about it?”

“You’ve women enough here for any man to make his choice,” said Colin. “Once he has got her completely out of his mind, he can return to the business of living like a reasonable man.”

The three sat quietly in the midst of noise and laughter; Colin annoyed that Margot should show any hesitation, François bewildered by the ridiculous position in which he had been put, and Margot serious, with an air of preoccupation.

And Margot said at last: “The one thing you didn’t tell me, Colin, was your own interest in the affair.”

“François is my friend,” muttered Colin.

“I know you better than that, Colin. There’s always a reason behind everything you do and seldom much friendship.”

Colin scowled and clutched hold of his dagger.

“Now there’s no need to lose that temper of yours.”

Colin made a great effort to recover his normal manner. “I never lose my temper unless something is to be got by it,” he said.

But Margot had forgotten him and was preoccupied with her own thoughts.

“It does seem to me that François here, who so far has not spoken a word, should have a say in the matter,” she said, at last. “Tell us, François, are you ready to play with any sort of woman who is pushed on to you or is there one woman who takes your fancy more than another?”

François hesitated and glanced at Colin. What was passing through his sharp mind was plain enough to Colin. Until that evening, the student’s life had stretched away before him, dry, arid, and uneventful as a waste of sand, but now he had fallen on his feet. Quickly as Colin himself he had seen that this life of ease and facile living was what he had been cut out for. At once he had believed that he could not do without it, once having known the power, but, at the same time, it was uncomfortable to be entirely dependent on Colin. There was a mocking gleam of triumph in Villon’s eye as he looked at Colin and then he turned to Margot to say that there was one woman he had seen that night who had obliterated any lingering memories of Catherine that he might have had.

“You mean me!” cried Margot. “I knew as soon as I saw you that I should never let you touch a finger of one of my women.”

A flush came over her face, spreading down her neck and even to her bare shoulders. The experienced woman of the world was

like a young girl at her first ball. Her breath came in short gasps, through parted lips, her face was set in a fixed, dazed smile, and she seemed unable to speak or move again.

But Colin was dismayed at the turn events had taken. He mistrusted women in business and he was not sure how far Margot would go. If she lost her head completely she might keep François well supplied with money, and then much of his own power over Villon would be gone. The black devil that sometimes took possession of the man, against his normal coolness, made its appearance. His face twisted malevolently and he began to laugh at Margot.

"You don't want a great, fat hulk of that sort, François!" he cried. "There's plenty of better women here."

Neither of them took any notice and, raising his voice, Colin told a tale of Margot's fatness, stuttering in his eagerness to offend.

"Last year," he cried, "even Margot became alarmed at her increasing fatness and consulted a quack. The quack told her to strip herself naked when she got out of bed each morning and skip, after which her fat would marvellously disappear. In spite of protests from Antoine, her husband, Margot began her skipping and continued for several days. But you see her breasts, François? Look at them well! See how heavy and low-swinging they are, like the udders of a cow! All she got out of that was two black eyes!"

The room roared with laughter at the joke but Margot and François seemed to think they were alone.

"Come, Antoine is away, and even if he were not it would not matter," said Margot.

She took Villon's arm and, without a glance to right or left, led him to her room.

A murmur of astonishment rippled round the room, there was a stunned silence for a few seconds and then the uproar started once more.

"What's come over our Margot?" said Little Jean. "She's never looked at a man for herself and now she picks up with this scraggy rascal, who'll take all her money and probably beat her into the bargain."

"I tell you, my sons, never be surprised at anything a woman does," said Brother Baude, with great unction. "Rank women as the only sin and take as your family motto: *Post coitus homo tristis*."

Little Jean's beady eyes were watching Colin.

"There's one of us more than surprised!" he said, biting his nails nervously. "What's the trouble, Colin? Why shouldn't Margot play with your new friend?"

Colin had quietened down somewhat and sat gloomily drinking Anjou. "You haven't as much brain as one of your own picklocks or you wouldn't have to ask!" he snarled. "A woman in love can't be managed, and if Margot keeps François Villon well supplied with money he'll snap his fingers at us."

He gave vent to his feelings by pinching the white, soft arm of Denise so that she squealed like a pig.

"There's one thing you've forgotten, Colin," said Regnier, rattling a dice-box and speaking for the first time. "You made a key for François, a discreet little key for the door of his uncle's house, and, in a few months, I should imagine he would do a lot to stop news of the key reaching his uncle."

"You're right; by Christ, you're right," whispered Colin, after a short pause. "When one of those sudden rages seizes hold of me I can't think. I choke. My brain is addled."

He wiped his brow in relief.

"What a fool I was!" he cried. "But I've always said that Regnier has as cool a head as any man in Paris."

"True enough," said Little Jean, seeing his chance. "You also use a picklock, Colin. Perhaps you'll be telling me whose picklock has most brains: yours or mine?"

"All right, Jean, I was hasty," said Colin.

He stared thoughtfully up at the closed door of Margot's room and then called for drinks all round.

"By God's tooth, we'll make you dance to a different tune before long, master François," he said.

CHAPTER V

THE examination for the Master of Arts degree was, in 1452, held in June, four months after Villon's introduction to Margot's house. François, along with his companions at the University, had to undergo two public disputations in the rue de Fouarre against learned masters.

In those months François had learned nothing. The secret key to his uncle's house had been in use practically every night and very few of the night-hours had been spent in bed. Despite the forthcoming examination, he had come to look on an evening spent peacefully at home as time wasted, the tavern being the centre of his life and the lecture-room merely giving the chance to rest and

collect his strength, weakened as it was already by so many nights with little sleep. François was not a strong, lusty man, although passionate: his desires and reckless indulgence of them soon outran his discretion and it was a pale, listless face Guillaume saw opposite him at table.

To be virtual master of entertainments at a tavern was ill preparation for an examination and François feared his ordeal in the rue de Fouarre. But, in desperation, he had used a flow of words and not forgotten to stand correctly before the Chancellor of Notre-Dame and the four professors, hardly daring to raise his eyes from the ground and standing modestly with both thumbs tucked in his belt as recommended in the rules.

The passing of an examination was largely a matter of luck or bluff. A wart on a man's face or a cast in his eye or a hesitancy of speech might prejudice the professors against him. But the licence was safely handed to François, with the Chancellor's blessing, and then came the solemn progress down the rue de Fouarre with the Beadle of University, asking if any of the professors objected to the inception of François Villon as master of arts. No voice being raised, he safely reached the Rector and took a solemn oath to respect the privileges of University, no matter how high he rose in the Church. Finally, his tutor, Jean de Conflans, came to spout an oration and place the academic bonnet on his head.

Villon's position in the Church was at that moment assured and he breathed a silent vow that University would see him no more. His uncle celebrated his success by broaching his best vintage of Burgundy and asking his friends to step round to the House with the Red Door. François answered their congratulations politely and humbly, but as soon as lanterns had been fetched to light the professors home he had turned impatiently to his uncle and told him that he had finished with schooling and did not intend to go on to the Faculty of Law for more study.

His words came as a great shock to Guillaume, and the distress showing in his face began to have effect on François, and to save himself from more talk he went to bed, saying that he would discuss the matter in the morning.

But, despite his uncle's arguments, François would not be moved from his decision to leave University. All he wanted was the nomination to a living and he asked his uncle to apply for that at once. The best Guillaume could do was secretly to delay application, hoping that a holiday would change his nephew's intention.

François could see what was in the priest's mind but he had no objection, for the days as well as the nights would be free to him.

Every day he was able to visit Margot's house in the Cité, his presence daily becoming a more essential part of its popularity amongst both townsmen and scholars. The company he found there and the pleasures Margot gave him allowed no time for any regret he might have felt at disappointing his uncle in the matter of the Law Faculty. In spite of his fly-away mind, so ready to tire of all routine, François never found that Margot cloyed his appetite. She was ingenious in devising new ways to please him and, despite her experience, as fresh and lively as a young virgin in love for the first time.

This would have been impossible but that Margot had latterly taken no interest in men. She had had to put up with their lusts early in life and had sworn to make herself independent of them. This she had achieved by careful living, so that she had been able to keep herself to herself for many years. Poverty she had known in its worst forms and her body she had been forced to barter, but the fate of most women of the streets was before her eyes. She realised that the woman who sold her body usually lost the power to keep her purse-strings shut: and so, from the first, Margot had been careful.

She was born in Paris, the daughter of a pastrycook in the Saint-Denis quarter. Her mother was of a strong religious turn of mind and, from birth, Margot, the first and only child, had been destined for the convent. She was born late, when her mother was over forty. Her parents had given up hope of a child and had begun to spend their time more profitably pondering the intolerable burning in hell, which was the lot of all sinners. The mother especially was obsessed with a sense of sin, and the unexpected arrival of a child seeming a miracle, they both felt that they could do no less than offer Margot to the Virgin Mary as a pledge for the considerate handling of their bodies after death. Fourteen years later, when Margot had been just about to embark on her novitiate, her father had suffered a number of misfortunes. His shop had been burned down by a drunken, truculent English man-at-arms and, for this, there was no hope of redress. The plague had taken his father, mother, and sister in the same day and, the next week, a wolf, loping down the frozen Seine, had attacked him and made off with his right arm. This, coming at a moment when their only daughter was about to be offered to the Church, seemed to the pastrycook like heavenly ingratitude. The faith of his wife was unshaken. She argued that the more misfortunes in this world, the greater the hope of eternal happiness in the next. But this was too much for a man who had just lost his arm, and the pastrycook immediately left Paris, without telling the world his destination.

Thus Margot, at fourteen, had been left with a helpless mother on her hands, when she herself had been fitted for no trade. She might have appealed to the Church but Margot refused to do that, without explaining her reasons, and they existed miserably for some years by taking in washing. Margot then began to discover the easy money of the streets but, at the same time, her natural common sense pointed out the dangers. She began to look around for more security.

She was a pretty, lush girl, with her innocent blue eyes and flaxen hair, kindly and loving, too, by nature. Her experience of men had given some expertness to her caresses, and this expertness, contrasting so piquantly with her innocent expression, made her charms especially attractive to the rich bourgeois. She was successively the mistress of a goldsmith, a chandler, and a mercer. Taking all they cared to give her, she made little alteration in her way of living, beyond a few more comforts for her mother. When the men asked why she did not spend her money on ornaments and finery, as the rest of the women, she would shrug her broad shoulders and say that, so long as she gave satisfaction and did not worry them, what she did with her money was her own concern. When her mother died, some years later, it was apparent that she had done nothing but save money, so that she could buy her discharge. She immediately abandoned her own relations with men and bought the house behind the cathedral, where she could satisfy the eternal lust of men for drink and women without inconvenience to herself. Since then, she had looked on no man as a man until she saw François Villon.

When she first set eyes on him in her tavern it was impossible to say why she took the student so instantly to her heart. François Villon was certainly no Adonis. Indeed, an Adonis might not have been expected to appeal to Margot, for she had seen too many of that kind carelessly breaking the lives of other girls, with no satisfaction to themselves or the girls. But François was likely to be just as restless and unreliable: that she was shrewd enough to take in at a glance. His mind too was quick and subtle, whilst hers was slow and essentially simple.

Perhaps it would have come nearest the truth to say that Margot's feeling for François was firstly a motherly one. Despite the insolent gaiety that caught him up, when Margot first stood and watched his brilliant entertaining of himself and her friends, she had the imagination that a melancholy ghost with a horrible grin stood at his elbow, the kind of grisly figure that struck fear into an honest woman in the Dance of Death which was then so popular an entertainment in Paris. She wanted to take him in her arms and

comfort and shield him. This feeling she had never known before for any man: it sucked the very marrow out of her bones. And it seemed ridiculously misplaced, for this man of all men would not appreciate pity or motherly love.

Margot had been too wise to offer it. She had obeyed both her instinct and her experience of men when she took him instantly to her bed, telling him truly that her submission meant more than that of many a virgin. And the following nights brought a passion between them. Margot's experience of men had made her tacitly agree with Colin's cynicism when he used to argue that the rule of one woman to one man was ridiculous, but she came to know that there would never be another man for her but François Villon. She strove to satisfy his passion, a pleasant enough task as her own ardour awoke, but she never lost the instinct to protect him.

That instinct was fully aroused by a private visit paid her by Colin. It was soon after the announcement of Villon's success in the examination and Colin had decided that, now the student had an assured position in the academic world, it was time to make use of him as an informer. As soon as Colin spoke of François, Margot was on her guard. Colin had adopted his most suave manner, and in that mood he always reminded Margot of the cunning wolf in the fairy tales her mother had sometimes used to vary religious parables. Even to the yellow teeth and the black stubble on the chin and the grinning jaws.

"It is not often that I have to request a quiet chat with you, Margot," he said. "We usually understand each other without wagging our tongues. But in this matter of François Villon I feel we may come to cross-purposes unless I make the position clear to you."

He waited for Margot to speak, but as she only nodded her head, with apparent indifference, he went on to tell her of his plans. "When I met François in the Mule, I saw at once he was the very man we had been looking for. He lives in the University quarter. He has free entry to the houses of the rich clerics. He is trusted by them all and lives with his uncle, a canon of Saint-Benoît, who is as well respected as any man in Paris. I brought François here to look after him. As you know, he was well able to look after himself and, in addition, he has found a powerful protector in you."

Colin gave a sly glance at Margot's set face. "This is where I am on ground I don't understand and I confess it to you freely," he continued. "A woman in love is beyond my comprehension and I have given up trying to estimate what she will do next. That you are in love with François Villon I can plainly see, but what you will do is a mystery only God can know. It is, however, only fair to you

and all our connections to warn you what I shall do. There must be no doubt in your mind of my seriousness. I am going to ask Villon to become our informer. If he refuses, as he probably will, I shall threaten to tell his loving uncle of the capers he has been cutting since I met him. As for you, Margot, I expect your persuasions to back my threats."

"I half expected something of the sort and shut my eyes, not wanting to see it," muttered Margot.

"Love is calculated to addle even the keenest business head. You're not to be blamed," said Colin, smiling in a supercilious manner. "But I had no serious doubt that I could rely on you and I am pleased to see that my belief——"

"Just a moment!" cried Margot. "I haven't said what I am going to do and I don't like the idea of François Villon running into danger. How could I now face life without him?"

"Much as you did before," answered Colin. "But you know the informer runs least risk of all."

"I can't explain to any man, least of all you, how I feel about this boy. I can't explain to myself," cried Margot. "But he's husband and son to me!"

"A curious and incestuous relationship that will surely lead you to the gates of hell!" said Colin, leering. "You'd best think about confession, Margot!"

"What can I do to save him?" she muttered.

"There is nothing you can do but behave like the sensible woman you used to be," said Colin. "Your handsome little lover is in no danger. He's the sort to slide out of any danger."

"I wouldn't have him tangled up with a gang like yours."

"That's the point," said Colin, suddenly becoming serious. "This is a matter for us all, and I warn you that if there is any interference you'll have the Coquillards to reckon with. I'll see to it that your house is shut up. And then you know as well as I do that François will have no more use for you. He'll be running after the drinks and the women I shall offer him."

"You judge others by yourself," said Margot. "It would also be possible for me to warn him to go back and ask his uncle's forgiveness whilst there is still time."

"You could do so but I'll take my chance of that."

François then came into the room with Regnier de Montigny and Margot hurried out at once.

"What's the matter?" said François suspiciously.

"A little rumpus in one of the bedrooms," answered Colin. "A man just came running to say that trouble had broken out between one of the girls and a customer and they are calling for the

watch. And how are things with you, François?" he concluded, offering a drink.

François snatched the wine and eagerly poured himself a drink. "Trouble at home once more!" he said, smacking his lips and taking another glass. "I told the old man that I couldn't put up with any more study. I said we should both have to be content with a simple priesthood for me and I asked him to apply for the letters of nomination. I had to listen to a lot of talk, uncle seemed to imagine I was throwing away the Pope's Chair. He said he had looked to me to raise the name of Villon and that more study was necessary if great preferment in the Church was to be had. But I was firm and, in the end, he had to see reason."

"What do you think the canon will do?" asked Colin.

"What he is going to do showed plainly in his face, for he's guileless as a sucking infant," said François. "A kind of relief showed suddenly and I knew he had decided not to apply for the living at the moment. He spoke of his influence not being what it was and said the nomination might not come until the spring. He imagines that a holiday will make me change my mind. But, by the Blessed Virgin's milk," François broke out violently, "I'll not change it for ten thousand uncles. I'll have no more of their senon and sensato, of their memoria and reminiscencia, of their longitudo and brevitudo vite. More of that and I'll be spitting in their goat faces!"

"No doubt the idea of a holiday appeals to you," said Colin. "You'll be free of the days as well as the nights, and your dear uncle will imagine you in the Pré-aux-Clercs along with your former colleagues."

"Truly, my Professor of Love, the thought had come to me!"

"And now," said Colin, "I can speak of a matter that has been in my mind for some time. Have you ever wondered why you were so well looked after here?"

"Margot had something to do with that."

"Surely the chance of her liking for you has lessened the strain on our own purses, but I ask you to believe that you would have been well treated in any case. It was always my intention to make you one of us. There is no need to ask if you have heard of the Coquillards. But what you do not know is that most of us here are members."

"What's that to do with me?" asked François.

"I'm coming to that," said Colin. "We of the Coquillards in Paris have recently lacked an informer to make our burglaries successful. We have been working in the dark when trying to get into the University quarter. Most of the money in Paris has found

its way into the coffers of Church and University, but these are the most carefully guarded. Need I say more? But as you don't seem inclined to spare my breath I'd point out that a man like you would be very useful to us. Living in the midst of the University quarter, and used to the company of churchmen, you could safely give us discreet information and no one is to know the source of the leakage."

"I'll have nothing to do with it!" cried François. "Is it likely that, whilst waiting for a living in the Church, I should risk the loss of it? Or run into danger for the money's sake when Margot gives me all the wine and food I want? You'd better look for somebody else."

"Sit down!" shouted Colin. "We haven't finished our talk by a long way and I half-expected such an answer from you. Did you imagine that we entertained you for the love of your company only? Aren't you ever going to cut loose from a woman's apron-strings, must you always pander and fawn and cadge? But I'll soon find a way to make Margot loose her grip of you."

But François was more frightened of the gallows than of Colin, and Regnier de Montigny was forced to take a hand. Coming in rather the worse for drink, he had stretched himself out on a bench, by the fire and had apparently fallen asleep. But at this point he roused himself to explain that Colin was losing his temper or else he would have made it clear that François would be quite safe.

"You'd be useless to us rattling your teeth on a gibbet," said Regnier, rubbing his hand through his ruffled hair and yawning. "There'll be nothing to incriminate you and you need take no active part in the work, dangerous activity probably not being your forte. Even if we should be taken, nothing would be gained by splitting on you and we are all bound to secrecy by oath. You would be entitled to a large share of the spoils, usually a sixth part, and I've a better opinion of your brains than to imagine you'll refuse."

"Don't forget I can make things look pretty black at home!" said Colin. "There's many a fine tale I'm longing to tell your uncle, of well-oiled locks and a secret key to his house in the cloister."

There would be trouble whichever way he turned: probable trouble if he joined the gang and certain trouble if Colin sought out his uncle. The money too was a temptation and suddenly François decided to do as they asked.

"But it would not be wise to mention my name even to the Coquillards in Paris," he said.

"You can leave that to us," answered Colin. "None shall know of this but we few in this house."

"I'll get you as much information as I can," muttered François, "but you'll understand that I can't go round asking every priest I know where he hides his money. 'Is it in the chimney, sir, or the box under your bed, is your door safe or maybe you could direct us to a faulty window-sash?'"

"You'll do well, I'm sure," said Colin; "and now that you can joke again we'll have a drink together. We are indeed comrades from now onwards and here's success to our ventures."

But as soon as François went to Margot's room he became so ill at ease that he blabbed his news in an agony of self-pity, asking what he should do to save his neck from the rope which he felt to be already hanging over his head. "I was a fool not to see what Colin intended," he said. "Now I am trapped like a rat."

"You could confess to your uncle, ask his forgiveness, and go back before it is too late," said Margot quietly.

"I haven't the heart," answered François. "He has no suspicion and would never recover from the shock of my deception. And who's to know that Colin would not trump up some false charge and have me denounced to the police?"

"Why, then, the only thing you can do is to give Colin what he wants and hope for the best," cried Margot. "Colin, I admit, has given me my orders. I am not one of his precious gang but he could make things bad for me. But I hope I am not thinking of him or my own love for you when I give you this advice. I don't know how I should live without you, scraggy good-for-nothing rake that you are. Yet I am trying to tell myself that I should send you back to respectable ways of living, if there was a way back. But, so far as I can see, there is none. Colin will never give anything up once he has got his teeth in and if you will not confess to the good priest——"

"It's not to be thought of," said François.

"Then you must be careful, François. Let Colin have just the facts that are pretty common knowledge on the Left Bank. Keep your mouth shut if you have information possessed by only you or a few others. There's many a renegade student in Paris, cadging a drink where he can, living on any woman, and I don't want you to get like that. But if you watch your step you should be safe. And when you have your fat living you may be able to cut away, or Colin may be sent out of Paris."

Her cool mind was a great comfort to François, and this time soon set him laughing at thought of the agitation in the University quarter when money was found to be disappearing. "By God, Margot, they'll be running round in circles like frightened hens," he cried. "I'll make them pay through the nose for the hours of

boredom I've endured in their lecture-rooms, and the greatest bore of them all, Jean de Conflans, shall be the first to suffer."

And in his new-found excitement François was for telling Colin of his plans at once, saying that some of the victims would doubtless come and speak to him of the robberies, bewailing their losses to the instigator of them, and it would be fine fun to offer sympathy and appear indignant that the police should allow such felonies.

CHAPTER VI

THE robbery at the house of Jean de Conflans was carried out the next week and François received fifty crowns as his share. This wealth was soon spent in presents to Margot and the girls, but it was easy to get his hands on more. He had only to whisper a few words to Colin and, as if by magic, his purse was full again.

It was a long step from the scholarly retreat of Saint-Benoît, in which the most of his life had been lived, to the noisy tavern behind the cathedral: a far cry from the brilliant, if erratic, scholar to the accomplice of thieves. But it was not such an unusual step in those days. Scholars were always living near the bone, even from their early days of study, when they often had to beg money to buy books. The Latin of the schools was not an out-of-the-way tongue to hear in the underground stews, in the taverns, or on the scaffold. What was unusual was that François had not made the change under real compulsion. Yet he had slid into it easily and almost inevitably: when he thought about it at all, he told himself that some men were born with such a hankering for the good things of life that they were as much impelled to take them as the tramp was impelled by his hunger to snatch a loaf from the stall.

But no lasting scruples of conscience came to disturb his pleasure, for there was nothing to frighten him. Robbery from a churchman was punishable by a horrible death, but a shadowy threat did not trouble him whilst he felt so remote from danger. There was hardly the time to think. Such prosperity had never been known in the house before and there was no reason why it should not go on for years, so long as their informer was kept in safety.

But his confidence was suddenly destroyed when he heard in the street that Colin de Cayeux had been taken up and was in the Petit Châtelet. Without even visiting Margot, François slunk

back to Saint-Benoît, certain that the end had come and the rope around his neck. Every moment he expected to hear the tramp of armed men coming down the rue Saint-Jacques and a stern voice at the door crying on Guillaume to deliver up his nephew, the informer, associate and friend of thieves and prostitutes.

Soon after, a message was sent to him, and when he returned to Margot's house he learned that Colin had merely fallen foul of authority because of a silly brawl with the watch.

"He was alone in this room with some of the girls," said Margot, "when several sergeants of the watch came in for a drink. They were already three-parts drunk and one of them put his hand down the dress of Denise and played with her breasts."

"Don't tell me the cynical Professor of Love lost his head over one particular woman? Had he forgotten all the neat arguments he used to put up?" said François.

"He also hates Perrenet, this particular sergeant," said Margot. "Whatever the reason, he went for Perrenet like a bull at a gate. By the Holy Mother, how strong Colin is when he gets one of these moods on him, and what a fight he put up. He nearly killed Perrenet and it took six of them all their time to pull him off and drag him away to the Châtelet. Three of my chairs and a table were broken in the process but it was worth paying a price to see such a fight."

"Bah, women are all the same!" muttered François. "They only admire muscle."

"It's a more comfortable commodity than brain. You know where you are with it," said Regnier. "But, by Christ, why did I have to be away from Colin this night of all nights? We'd have chased those snivelling sergeants all the way to hell!"

"For my part, I agree with François," said Brother Baude. "Colin is now reposing on filthy straw, dining off hard crusts and water, merely because another man touched the breasts of his mistress. Was this an exchange for a reasonable man to make? What harm was done to anybody in the matter of the breasts? Now if the fellow had stolen a week's supply of Burgundy or Anjou or even Beaune——"

Little Jean, who always supported any argument put up by Brother Baude, emphasised his remarks by spitting in the hearth, perilously near a fat capon that François had been eyeing greedily.

"It is possible that the learned Father in Christ has not stated the case explicitly," drawled Regnier de Montigny. "From what I know of Denise, she probably wanted the sergeant's hand to wander. And Colin, as a hard-headed man of business, naturally resented what he had paid for going to another man, even a small part of it."

He did what he did because it was a duty he owed to every man of property and he fulfilled that duty gallantly. Looked at in this light, does not the matter wear a different aspect?"

"Don't split hairs," said Margot. "Colin went for Perrenet because the black dog got on his shoulders."

"They're almost as bad as the professors in the schools," grumbled François.

"My children, Colin should have stuck to the bottle," concluded Brother Baude.

François realised that Margot's house would be even more pleasant than before as, with Colin out of the way, he could indeed feel that he was the master. His sense of security was further increased when Little Jean, the other expert, refused to use his picklocks, saying that without Colin they would be like sheep without a dog.

And so the weeks passed uneventfully until, in the afternoon of December 6th, 1452, François came knocking at Margot's door, crying on them to open quickly and swearing that the police were after him.

"Are they far behind?" asked Margot. "You should have known better than run straight here. We had to shut our doors because news came to us of riots in the town. But we don't want the police to notice that you hide your head in Mother Margot's skirts!"

"I think I gave them the slip," said François. "Set somebody to watch at the window for safety's sake if you like, but we're not concerned in this. There has been more trouble between the students and the Provost and I happened to be standing by. You'll remember that I have often spoken of the boundary stone of Mlle. de Bruyères that was stolen by the students. Was it not these same men who hustled Colin, Guy Tabary, and me when we were on an expedition of our own at the house of a woman? Wasn't the whole course of my life changed? I might have been a very different man, but now you see me, a despised and rejected lover, trying bravely to smile——"

"Keep to the point!" interjected Regnier. "You know you're talking nonsense and we've heard that other fine tale too often before."

"So I should think!" cried Margot.

"As you're so eager then," said François, "you must know that to-day, the Feast of Saint Nicholas, was the day chosen by the Provost to order the seizure of the stone. Then the Provost's lieutenant, after a morning drink near by, raided a house at Saint-Etienne, where some of the stolen signs were found. The dis-

covery seemed to inflame the police, who hustled the students, and then broke into another house where shelter was said to have been given to the fugitives. This house belongs to a priest named Andry Bresquier, one I know well, and the next on our list to be visited."

"Shades of Colin de Cayeux! Perhaps we'll go there when he is restored to us!" said Regnier.

"Colin will never lovingly stroke his picklock in that house, Regnier. Andry Bresquier was away, saying mass in Saint Julien-le-Pauvre. The police forestalled us, on the orders of their lieutenant, wrecking and looting the whole house most thoroughly. I heard his voice peevishly crying: 'Break everything, take all you want, and if anybody resists, kill him!' Those clodhoppers took what was ours by right, but I will say that they worked like Trojans. I saw them staggering away with books, bed-linen, plate, clothing, furniture, and beds. Crazy by the priest's good wine, they next broke into the hostel of Coquerel, where the master Darien was lecturing, insulted the master, and dragged away thirty or forty of his pupils as captives. To crown all, one of the sergeants paraded the town in a student's gown, a great, pot-bellied man reeling drunken from side to side the street, with the gown trailing behind like a banner. This last insult is one they'll never stop shouting about, but it's my belief the King is behind the Provost and the clerical power is on the wane."

"There have always been student riots," said Regnier. "But I doubt if any have caused such trouble as these. Perhaps things are coming to a head, but it doesn't concern us so long as you keep out of harm's way."

"I'm not so sure of that," interjected Margot. "I've been listening to your chatter and there's a nice little way of earning a few crowns occurred to me. You'll not deny that the town has talked of nothing but this affair all the year. The name of Mlle. de Bruyères has become a by-word in every house and tavern. Although she is a fat, waddling widow, scurrilous songs are written of her chastity and fantastic stories told of her demands for justice and of her influence with the King. The public fancy has been tickled, and if François could write a poem to celebrate these latest events, mentioning the name of this house, then much custom would come to us. There's many in Paris would rush to meet the author of such a poem. We have missed the money that Colin used to bring in and there'd be such a demand that I should have to take on more girls and the cellars would be emptied in a week!"

The silence that fell on the room was broken by Regnier as he smashed his fist on the table and swore that never was there such

a woman before. "You've got a rare head on your shoulders, Margot!"

"It's a neat idea," said François. "But I'm not sure that I like it. You've said yourself that it must not be generally known that François Villon comes here so often, or else it may occur to the police that he knows something of the robberies which have occurred on the Left Bank, where he lives."

"I expected that objection," answered Margot. "But most of our customers are ordinary citizens, tired of their wives and eager for a little looseness, who come from over the water on the other side of the town. They won't know who you are or trouble themselves once we get them here. But if the risk is too great——"

"I'll do it, Margot," cried François. "You're a woman in a thousand and I'm a lucky fellow to have the chance of helping you. I'll let you have the poem in no time."

"Make it as hot and strong as you can, master!" said Tabary.

"Trust me for that, Guy. I'll make the churchmen look the pretty fools they are. The memory of that sergeant swaggering unchallenged in an academic gown is still fresh in my mind. I'll fetch the citizens here to gape in their dozens, whilst you shall have the copying of it in that neat legal script of yours, Guy!"

"Here, no more talk," said Margot. "Take these bottles of Burgundy upstairs for inspiration and don't let us hear from you until you've finished."

Her voice followed him up the stairs, saying that he was to make it clear where they lived, as there were a number of houses in the town called by her name and they did not want to see the good money diverted to another house.

Their room was quiet and it was easy to scribble off the poetry. His subject ready to hand, and satisfied with facile, jingling rhymes, he recounted the story of the boundary stones of Mlle. de Bruyères from the beginning, and called it: "The Romance of the Pet-au-Diable." He spoke of the riots in the town and especially of the student mania for stealing signs from taverns and houses and the taking, as they said, of the Stag to marry the Sow to the Bear, with the Popinjay to give to the Sow when she was married. He told of these months of nightly rioting and the open defiance of the students, backed as they were by University's solemn insistence of its own rights of trial, and as his pen scrawled down the sheets he enjoyed his task. The poem became a lampoon of University. His own contempt for the professors ran away with his pen and the final insult from the pot-bellied sergeant came as a fantastic climax to this account of an institution which had seen its day and was in urgent need of reform.

This poem might give the King a laugh if he could see it, thought François, but I suppose he would have to pretend displeasure. It sails a little near the wind of heresy.

Misgiving came over him at that dreaded word but, remembering that the work was unsigned, François scribbled in place of signature: "At the house of Margot in the Cité behind Notre-Dame"; and threw the manuscript to Guy Tabary downstairs.

The poem caused a greater sensation in the town than they had dreamed of. Customers flocked to the house, asking to meet the author, and it became an embarrassment to invent excuses. A good few were deemed harmless and these François greeted in the inner room, discussing his work with them and skilfully turning the conversation to the good wine sold in the establishment and the women that went with it. Their company he soon found dull, for they could only talk of their work or their wives, the new taxes or the price of bread, and it was always a relief when the girls took them off his hands, leaving him free to sit by Regnier and, as he said, wash the taste of them out of his mouth. And did he grumble to Margot she only laughed, and showed the money they were taking, saying he should be prepared to suffer a deal of boredom for such an amount of gold.

Then one day, in early spring of the new year, Colin was back. Prison did not seem to have affected him save that his cheeks were more sunken and the glitter of his blue eyes was harder than ever. But he had evidently had much time for thought in prison. The first thing he did was to take Denise by the shoulders and, ignoring her scratches and bites, put her out of the house, to the delighted applause of Brother Baude.

But when the tale of their new wealth came to be told they were surprised to see that he gave no sign of pleasure, and Margot's face showed her bewilderment as she lamely brought her recital to an end.

"A pretty little trick in its way," said Colin. "But paid for at too high a price."

"What do you mean, Colin?" said François. "Prison must have addled your wits, man! It was easy for me to scribble the doggerel, and whilst it has not been easy to listen to the drivel of our new customers, I have managed it for sake of the shining coins you see before you on the table."

"Fools that you are!" cried Colin. "Didn't I tell you, Regnier, and you, Margot, to keep François safe and quiet? I knew he wasn't to be trusted, get a drink or two inside him and he's ready for anything, but I expected better from you two."

"What are you driving at?" asked Margot. "We were careful

not to let him meet people we thought were unsafe and I don't see what harm can come of it."

"You can't see farther than the nose on your face or else you can't have read the poem. Its author will be lucky if he escapes prosecution for heresy, if it be heresy to jeer at the Church, and churchmen won't take long to decide that!"

"I didn't sign the poem," muttered François.

"Do you think they'll be long in finding out your name? Even in prison I heard of the poem, and the gaolers quoted some of the dirty lines to me. I knew the style at once and, although the gaolers did not know the writer's name, you may be sure their masters do by now. The least that can happen to you, François, is the loss of your letters of nomination and we may now be certain that you will never be nominated to a living."

"Oh, come, Colin!" said Margot. "It can't be as bad as that. True, I didn't have the whole of this poem read to me and maybe François has gone too far, but with his high connections——"

All of them sat stricken into silence by Colin's suggestion. François tried to grasp its full significance but his brain was numbed and conscious only of an overwhelming sense of calamity. Like a poor, mazed idiot he heard Colin say that François Villon would most likely get kicked out of ecclesiastical circles and, in that case, would be no use to them as informer or anything else. Even Margot's voice, high-pitched, raised in his defence, failed to reach his understanding. He only knew that he must get away from that house of ill-luck, and as he got to his feet and stumbled to the door no move was made to stop him, for Colin made sign that he was to be left alone.

CHAPTER VII

THE next week Guillaume de Villon received an unexpected visitor to his house in the cloister. This was no less a personage than an emissary from the Rector of University, a tall, solemn-faced individual, who called in response to the preliminary application the canon had made for his nephew's letters of nomination. With much circumlocution, the official had given Guillaume the explicit warning not to persist in the application. He told Guillaume that François Villon had written a notorious poem making a mock of both University and Church. The malice had been so bitter, and

the poem had become so well known in the streets, that it was quite impossible for its author to become even a parish priest.

The impassive figure left tragedy behind him. Guillaume de Villon had always been of a quiet, studious nature. His love of books and his thirst for learning had caused him to leave his native Burgundy at fifteen and come to an unknown Paris, without friends or relations to help him. In that often grim town, with war, starvation, and pestilence always close at hand, he had fought hard for his life and his learning. He scraped along by giving Latin lessons to the sons of the merchants or shopkeepers, and even by begging in the streets. This was not unusual and Guillaume de Villon would have been the last man to claim any merit for himself. But his persistence, in his own opinion, had received more than its reward. He was not of a nature to desire great advancement in the Church for himself. His was not a great brain, he knew: he was no subtle scholar but merely a persistent, humble, and contented acolyte in the Temple of Learning. Even had he wished for advancement, he had no influence to offset his lack of great scholarship. And he thought himself better off than any Pope or Cardinal when he was made a canon of Saint-Benoît. It was a poor community but he was allowed a reasonable stipend, a house and a garden. No luxuries were possible but he would not have known what to do with luxuries. So long as he had his garden and his books and his work in the quarter, he asked no more of God.

And when François had been brought to him, twelve years before, he had come to believe that God was being over-generous. The sharp little face of the nine-year-old boy had filled him with pity, and as the boy had grown to manhood, for Guillaume de Villon he had taken the place of a son. François was the joy of his life. He was proud as a doting father of the boy's quickness and intelligence and progress in the humanities.

As for the future, that had been mapped out in his mind for years past. Such a lad could not fail to carve out a great career for himself, firstly, in University and, secondly, in the Church. The abrupt ending of the University career at his nephew's request had shocked the canon but, although he had at last made the preliminary inquiry for the letters of nomination, he still believed that François would be induced to change his mind and return to University.

He had always supposed that François was just such another student as he had been, with a love of high learning and a reverence for the Church. Perhaps the lad's spirit was a little higher. Perhaps he was more erratic. But that might be put down to the touch of genius in him.

And then had come this sudden news of scandalous poetry

and loose companions and carousing with low company in taverns.

At last, when he had somewhat recovered, Guillaume sent word that François was to go to his study immediately.

To François the expected summons came as a relief, and one glimpse of the canon's face was enough to tell him that Colin's prophecy had come true. He expected to be turned out of the house and, as he stood before Guillaume, he had a picture in his mind of what he would become. He saw that he would drift from woman to woman, from tavern to tavern, until he became a sodden hanger-on in the beer-houses, a lower Guy Tabary, fawning and begging for drink until somebody was minded to slit his gizzard and drag the body in the kennels.

But all Guillaume could see in his nephew's face was a dogged sullenness, which caused his bewilderment to increase as he explained that the letters of nomination had been refused because of a poem which had gained the name of Villon an unpleasant notoriety amongst the churchmen.

"I was told that this poem is so scandalous in its mockery of the Church that prosecution for heresy was at one time seriously considered," said Guillaume. "I believe that a heresy trial would have followed if they had not known you were my nephew. I did not know how to answer them. I expected my application to be granted without question. So far as I know, your life has been quiet and orderly, yet all I heard from the authorities was this talk of your verses quoted with joy by enemies of the Church and the scum of the town."

The priest's words faded away, for he was puzzled by his nephew's unresponsive attitude. The situation was too much for him, and to cover the awkward silence François muttered that the poem had been written in a tavern when he had had too much wine and did not know what he was doing.

Guillaume asked to see the verses and was obviously bewildered by the spirit of levity in the poem and its mockery of those two things on which his spiritual life had been builded, love for the Church and reverence for book-learning. After he had finished the reading he sat nervously fumbling with his spectacles, wondering how such ideas could have come to François. "You certainly did not pick them up here."

"Haven't I told you that I was fuddled with drink and did not realise what I was doing?"

"I have not forgotten," Guillaume answered; "but the ideas must have been in your mind or else wine could not have brought them to the surface."

But he broke off short in his reprimands, for there was something hidden he did not understand. He was frightened to press François too hard in case both said harsh words for which they would afterwards be sorry, and so went on to say that the poem was a boyish prank, excessively punished because of the unfortunate publicity the verses had received in the town.

"I do not think they can persist in this attitude," he said. "I believe they will have to nominate you when you have lived this down and I shall do all in my power to hasten that. But the scandal may take some years to blow over. We have to consider what is best for you to do and I am wondering if you have any suggestion to make."

François saw that he was not to be turned out of the house and perversely he made the suggestion himself: "Let me go back to the gutter I came from, uncle."

"There's no need to talk like that!" said Guillaume. "This is only a little set-back and soon overcome, I hope, with a reasonable patience. I am not a rich man, François, and most of my money will be needed to obtain forgiveness from the Church. Moreover, I confess it does not seem wise to keep you hanging about in idleness."

Guillaume paced up and down the room and finally stood out on the balcony, as if seeking inspiration from his beloved town, whilst François, listlessly watching, remembered that only a few months before they had stood together in his own room like father and son. He would never be able to make the old man understand what had happened to him for he did not understand himself. But the old confidence between them was dead and gone.

Yet Guillaume was calm again as he turned from contemplation of the street and said that François might get a post as scrivener to a lawyer. "Perhaps it is my own training that makes the suggestion," he said. "There's no denying that your wage will be small and the work dull. But we want the restoration of your good name and this can most easily be contrived amongst the lawyers. Such work is a big drop from my aspirations but it is a pill we have got to swallow."

The priest was diffident in manner but François said at once that he had no objection. "Lawyers manage to surround all they do with an odour of sanctity," he said; "and, although I fear it may stifle me, I will do as you wish, uncle. Something has got to be done to get me out of this scrape."

"A decision that takes a load off my mind," cried Guillaume. "All I need do is apply for such a post and may God give you the strength to persist in it."

So the priest appeared to have recovered from his shock, but François knew that he would never be quite the same man again. And his admiration for Guillaume had never been so strong as it was at that moment. The denial of the letters of nomination was a blow sudden enough to destroy all his interest in life and yet no time had been wasted in querulous complaints to God, in justifiable censure, or even in pointed reminders of all he had done for François with nothing but this slap in the face as his reward. He had quietly set out to retrieve what he could from the ruin of his ambition, although he must have known as well as François that there was little hope of ever obtaining complete forgiveness from the Church. But his good name must be restored as far as possible or else he would be a marked man. He must keep away from Margot and the rest of them, although he understood his own nature well enough to wonder how long his good conduct would last.

There was much hilarity in Margot's tavern and in most parts of the town when it was known that François Villon had at last been found out and forced to take a post as scrivener in a lawyer's house. His quick tongue, his powers of mimicry, his ability to poke fun at the rich, and his facile poems had given him much notoriety. When men heard of François Villon they thought of tilted bottles, laughing, wanton girls, rich food, and the roar of voices chanting his most recent lampoon against the rich bourgeois, the University, or even the King himself. Guillaume lived in an ecclesiastical backwater, cut off from the life of the town, but his nephew's fame had reached such heights, in little over a year, that it was strange even he had not heard of it before.

But his was the popularity always awarded to cleverness. People liked to listen to his jokes or his talk or his poems. But the man's face and his works had too much edge to them for comfort: ordinary folk never knew how to take him. His brain respected nothing. They were as likely to find themselves the next objects of his biting tongue and, whilst they were ready to jeer at the rich for having too much money or battering on the poor, it was a different matter when it came too close. Such irreverence came near to sacrilege, they thought. Thus François had a large audience, a willing audience, but they had not taken him to their hearts. And so the news that he was crouched over a desk from early morning until sunset was received with malicious joy. The general opinion was that a man could be too clever and that discipline did nobody any harm.

There could be no mistake about the discipline. François sat with his companions scribbling, on sheets of parchment, endless reports of law-suits written in dog-Latin. Even sunset did not

always end his labours, for the lawyers had special permission to break curfew and he was often to be seen, in the window of his master's house, still scribbling away by candlelight.

Colin especially was pleased to hear the news of his humble position. Reckless foolishness was a thing he never forgave, when he lost by it himself. And his maliciousness even made him organise an expedition to jeer at François.

Villon's master was François de Ferrebouc, a well-known notary, reckoned to be one of the coming men. His house was in the rue de la Parcheminerie, and one evening, when he knew François to be working late, Colin took some of his friends to jeer. Margot railed at him and refused to go, whilst Regnier de Montigny said he would not kick an old friend and Brother Baude refused to leave his bottle for any man. But Little Jean, Guy Tabary, Casin Cholet, Jean the Wolf, and Dom Nicolas, an unfrocked monk, were either curious or afraid of Colin. They went with him to the rue de la Parcheminerie and, standing in front of the lawyer's window in which François was disconsolately sitting, the flickering candlelight on his face, they sang the song then popular in the town with the refrain: "Open your window to me, Guillemette."

François tried to ignore them, but Colin began to throw mud at the window and the other scribblers took exception to this. They sent for the watch and, with a few final insults, Colin and his friends took themselves off.

Near Margot's house they met François de Ferrebouc himself. He knew Colin de Cayeux in his capacity as locksmith and, as the lawyer wished to discuss the making of a key, Colin asked him to take a drink in Margot's house. Once their business had been settled, Colin brought up the subject of François Villon, his real reason for inviting the lawyer into the house.

"How do you find your new scrivener, sir?" asked Colin. "Does he give you every satisfaction?"

François de Ferrebouc was a fat, stolid man. His belly so bulged as he sat in his chair that he appeared to be leaning backwards and peering over its top. A massive hand was placed on each knee and his knuckles were so surrounded and covered with fat that they looked like ten ridiculous dimples. His bulk, his sagging double chin, and his blown purple cheeks gave him a stupid look, and it was not until the cunning little eyes were noticed that the astute brain underneath was realised.

Colin's question amused him. He shook with laughter until they began to think he would be struck with apoplexy.

"François Villon!" he cried, at last. "Yes, I remember now that he is a friend of yours."

"He was a friend," said Colin grimly.

"Speak for yourself, Colin," put in Margot quickly. She had been moodily drinking by herself and, until then, had not spoken a word or looked up.

Colin winked at François de Ferrebouc.

"Ah, it's like that, is it?" said the lawyer. "And I would wager a gold crown to a blanc that master François and I will not be on speaking terms for more than a month longer. Of all the lazy, feckless, good-for-nothing scoundrels that ever put pen to parchment, commend me to François Villon. He'll work in fits and starts and mostly not at all. Says it is monotonous work, not suited to his capacity, when all the time he should be thankful to get any sort of work at all after his insult to the Church. A pile of faggots is his rightful seat and would be his, too, but for the favour shown his uncle. Few men will be found to believe what I am now going to tell you but can you imagine what I caught him doing to-day?"

The lawyer's face took on a deeper shade of purple. The others had drawn away out of respect, leaving him alone with Colin and Margot and Regnier, but he seemed to desire an audience for this piece of news. He looked round the room at them and then raised his voice dramatically, as if he had come to his peroration in court.

"I discovered that this aforesaid François Villon had been scribbling some jargon he called poetry in the margin of the document he was copying. His contention was that he performed the crime absentmindedly but, if that is the case, absentmindedness is a quality I shall not much longer be able to endure in one of my scribes."

Colin laughed and said François Villon would scribble poetry in his sleep. But the lawyer seemed to think the outrage he had described made further talk impossible and, finishing his drink, he said good night to Colin and moved towards the door. Just as he reached it, the door opened and François stood in the room.

"François!" cried Margot, and rushed towards him.

François put his arm round her shoulders but stood looking at François de Ferrebouc. At last, he gave the lawyer an ungracious salute and, having received his due, his master went out.

"You keep notable company nowadays!" said François.

"He only came to see Colin on a matter of business," said Margot. "François, how glad I am to see you! Life has been a sad business for me since the nights have not been spent with you."

"Certainly she has not been herself, François," said Regnier de Montigny, coming forward to greet François. "Fretting and brooding, I do believe she has lost most of her fat and certainly all

her interest in this place. By Christ, how do you put up with that bladder of lard who's just gone out?"

"That's more than I know, Regnier, lad!" answered François.

The others did not speak, seeking their cue from Colin, who sat moodily drinking, a black look on his face.

Regnier winked at Margot and François. "Don't you see who is here, Colin?" he cried. "François Villon, eager to drink with his old friends."

Colin lurched to his feet with a snarl, pushing a chair out of his way so that it fell with a crash. "What do you want, scribbler?" he said.

"You come to the point with all your old charming style," François answered, "and I'll say that I came to see those of my friends who would be glad to see me."

"None of them are glad to see you," answered Colin. "And if they are, they won't be allowed to show it. We have no use here for idlers and shirkers, as such. You could be as lazy as you liked so long as your information was useful. Now you cannot be welcome in the houses of the clerics and therefore can have no exact information to bring us."

An awkward silence followed, which Margot tried to bridge by ordering drinks all round, but Colin refused his.

"You could do a little work on your own account," said Little Jean, pulling his finger joints nervously. "If I were in your shoes, I should rob my uncle. He must have some gold stowed away and we can make better use of it than he can."

"Now there's sense in that," said Colin. "If you're disposed to try it, then you'll be almost as welcome here as you were before."

"I'll never do it," cried François. "The old man has looked after me all these years and, dog that I am, I'm not mean enough to repay his kindness in that way."

The blood rushed to Colin's face and he raised his fist above Villon's head, his whole body quivering with rage.

"Get out of this house at once, unless you wait to be thrown out!" he cried. "And don't let me see that ugly face of yours again. It gives me the gripes!"

François looked round the room but there was nobody to help him. Little Jean avoided his eyes and became preoccupied with the palms of his hands. Brother Baude buried his face in a tankard. Guy Tabary was fiddling with his belt. Dom Nicolas, a huge, red-faced monk who sat with his gown pulled up above his knees and a girl on each knee, had his face buried in their breasts. Regnier de Montigny sat looking scornfully at Colin but he made no move.

The girls were nervously edging towards the door, ready to bolt as soon as daggers came out.

But François had forgotten the woman who stood at his side.

"You're very handy with your orders in my house, Colin," Margot said. "You don't intend them to be mistaken."

"They must not be mistaken," answered Colin. "We don't want fools of this sort. Apart from his uselessness, he's a danger. A man who can't keep his tongue still or hold a drink is always dangerous!"

"Useless is hardly the word I should have chosen for François Villon in a house of this sort. Whatever your opinion, I'm the one to give orders in this place, Colin."

"But I'm telling you we can't do with him, not even as chief clown!"

"I'm the one to decide that," said Margot. "If I want to keep François, I shall do so."

"Better let me go!" muttered François. "I shall only be a hindrance to you."

Margot sat on a table swinging her legs, whilst Colin played with the dagger at his belt. He looked so murderous that François moved across in front of Margot, drawing his own dagger underneath his gown as he did so. But at last Colin managed to swallow his rage and, with livid face, said that François was not worth quarrelling over. "I don't know that he can do a lot of harm, and if you'll answer for him then I'll be satisfied. François will always find somebody to sponge on, and if you care to make a fool of yourself, then it's no concern of mine."

And nodding to the others to follow him Colin left the house, saying that all women were mad and that he was unlucky to be mixed up with any of them.

"It's good to see you back again," said Margot, throwing her arms round François.

"And I hardly understood what had drawn me back until I saw you," said François. "Although life in a lawyer's house is enough to drive a man into the Seine!"

"As bad as all that?" said Margot, pouring him out a drink of hypocras. "Your love-potion, do you remember?"

"I remember the aphrodisiacal effect of cinnamon and ginger, little goat!" said François, smiling at her suddenly in his old manner. But memory of François de Ferrebouc wiped the smile from his face and he went on restlessly speaking of his life as scrivener.

"I've only to look round at my companions to see what the future holds for me," he muttered. "Crabbed, bald, dried-up, prematurely old men, doing nothing all their lives but scratch on

parchment. They come out at the same time each morning, do exactly the same things at exactly the same time each and every day. When I complain of dullness they look surprised, and then say that when it's a question of earning your bread-and-butter personal feelings have to be subdued. 'You'll come to see sense as we did, my boy, and knuckle under to discipline.' Better end up under a table, I often think!"

"I knew you would come back to me," said Margot, determined to take his mind off the lawyer. But François did not seem to have heard her remark.

"Know this, Margot, believe me when I tell you that all imagination has gone from these men," he continued. "I realise that if they were given money, so that they could live in comfort for the rest of their lives, they would not know what to do with themselves but would wander aimlessly from their houses to the rue de la Parcheminerie, crying on their old master to give back their desks and pens. I could imagine some committing suicide and, looking round at them, I wonder which would choose to fall into the Seine and which to hang from a rafter in their own house. Little enough would be needed to kill any of them!"

Margot took the only way possible to stop his talk and, grabbing his arm, pulled him upstairs to their room, showing him it was clean and spotless. She had allowed nobody in whilst he had been away and had cleaned the room herself against the time when they would come together again.

And, as François took her in his arms, he felt certain that in her he had the protection he needed. He tried to explain his thoughts and speak of her as his shield but the words sounded futile. Perhaps they understood each other without words and soon François knew that his body and mind were at peace for the first time in months.

And later Margot advised François to have as little to do with Colin and the rest of them as possible. "Talk and dice with them if you will, but don't get drawn into their burglaries. I'll look after you and see you want for nothing, but even I should be helpless if you were caught with your hand in a strong-box."

"You have upset Colin by taking up with me again."

"He'll get over it, and if he does not, I don't much care. My life was nothing without you, François. But you'll find the others agreeable, at any rate. For the rest, you must expect to have fallen from your high standing. You'll no longer be of any consequence except as a jester who amuses them."

"I have you, Margot, consolation for greater evils," answered François, "and spending my nights with you, I may even be able to endure my days with the lawyers."

CHAPTER VIII

SUCH a situation could have only one ending. There was nothing but the shell of life left for François in Saint-Benoît: the high hopes of the whole community for him had gone and he came to feel that he was there on sufferance. His uncle's manner towards him had not changed at all. He was still the same patient, kindly man he had always known, but in the eyes of Marthe and Jean Flastrier, a timid, world-shy little man, François thought he detected aversion. The monks he met in the gardens or cloisters seemed to be more distant in manner than ever. As a result, François became ready to take offence, finding double meaning in a remark when none was intended. He imagined the monks pointing him out as a failure, even praying for him, asking each other how he still had the impudence to eat the good canon's bread. Thus the rich food and drink and easy popularity he enjoyed at Margot's house became more and more important to his self-respect as his own good name in Saint-Benoît decreased.

For sake of his uncle he tried to endure what he called humiliation, but in the fall of 1453 Margot asked him to leave the cloister and live openly with her.

"I have seen how you are drifting and it's not reasonable to expect you to settle down at your desk in the lawyer's house," she said. "You can't live your life in two parts, one of them has to go; and if I don't take you, I can see you'll get more and more restless, until you'll end by joining in with Colin and his dangerous undertakings out of sheer boredom. And how could I bear life with you twisting and turning at the end of the long rope? But if you come here, there's a trade ready-made, and so long as I've any money I'll see you don't run into danger. You'll be a great help to us and we'll have such prosperity as we've never seen before, not even when you wrote the poem."

"I'm lucky to have such a woman," said François, "and what you say is true. There is in me a weakness which would make me drift, even though I knew I was going to certain death. There's no use in fighting any longer, although I don't know how I'll break the news to my uncle."

François felt that the break could only be made at once or else his resolution would fail, and the next morning, not long after day-break, he gathered his few possessions and slipped out of the

house, leaving a note for his uncle on the table. Outside, in the cold morning air, François realised the enormity of his offence. Surely I am the lowest of men, he thought. And he lingered irresolutely in the shadow of those cold, grey stones, thinking of the years that had gone and the love wasted on him and the chances he had missed. The cloister seemed a living thing, familiar and steadfast, the background to his life, and he was looking at it for the last time as a friend. Saint Benoît himself was doubtless full of anger as he looked down on the scene from above, and François was almost turning back, when there came a memory of the alternative life at the lawyer's house, contrasting with the ease and good living he would enjoy with Margot.

Guillaume discovered the note himself and turned it over in his hands, asking himself why François should write to him. He took the letter into his study and, uncomprehending, he read that his nephew had gone from him, saying that he had a friend who would give him work and that he would be a burden on his uncle no longer. The paper then slipped from his limp fingers to the floor and the priest mechanically opened a Horace that was lying on his desk.

Marthe found him like that an hour later, the page unturned, but, after he had passively submitted to her remedies of vinegar and smelling-salts, Guillaume motioned her from the room and sat with the thought in his mind that he was getting to be an old man. Things were moving too quickly for him, he was losing his awareness, but all thought was soon beyond him. Tiredness numbed what senses he had recovered and, fumbling for his gown and taper, the canon was only dimly aware that he had yet to prepare himself for early Mass.

Like most mild-mannered men, Guillaume de Villon was prone to the fixed idea and, when he had recovered his mind, he jumped to the conclusion that François must be left to himself. He told Marthe the boy must have the chance to work out his own destiny. It would be fatal if they tried to drive him back to Saint-Benoît and François knew, without being told, that they would always have a home for him. The priest insisted that, like a foolish old man, he had brought this trouble on his own head, for he had not allowed an outlet for his nephew's high spirits. The future, he concluded, could only be with God.

Eighteen months passed before Guillaume heard of François. His friends, respecting his sorrow, never mentioned the name and Marthe had been warned to keep her curiosity unsatisfied. But in May 1455 it became clear to Guillaume that Marthe was hugging a secret to herself. His servant, usually so talkative, had become

morose, and the unnatural tension so irritated the canon that he called her back one day into his room and asked what was the matter with her.

"I had not intended to tell you, master," she said, "but I suppose you are bound to hear one day. I obeyed your order and didn't try to find out what had happened to François. The news came by chance from a porter in the streets. All these months, I have been forced to watch you growing in on yourself. You are got thinner, and that I can't bear for the life of me to see, but your lack of interest is not only in food but also in life, and even religion. You go about your tasks like a man in a dream, without love for the best of them. But news has come to me and, although it is bad news, I think you'd rather hear bad news than no news at all."

"If it is bad news, then François needs my help, Marthe."

"He's in no need of your help to live," answered Marthe. "He has got more money than ever he has had before."

"You've seen him then?"

"No, I haven't seen him, Master Villon, but he has written of it in a poem."

"Those unlucky poems!" muttered Guillaume.

"It was the poem that put me on his track," said Marthe. "I heard the porter reciting it and told him that he ought to be ashamed of himself. I then made inquiries and discovered that your precious nephew is living with a loose woman in a tavern behind Notre-Dame."

"God save the lad!" cried Guillaume.

The two sat silent, the servant nervously watching her master. "No, Marthe, don't look so worried," said Guillaume. "I'm not going to die or faint or even give up hope. Perhaps I was wrong to let François go his own way but I did what I thought was right."

"You did the only thing possible, master," cried Marthe. "Had there been salvation in the boy, he would have found it, but he's an ungrateful scoundrel!"

"You must not judge others!" answered Guillaume. "His temptation was very strong. But he must feel remorse, and if only I could see him I am certain that he could be brought to a proper understanding once more. All I can do, Marthe, is to go and see him."

"What! A canon of Saint-Benoît to set foot in the house of Margot, the place that has become so well known all over Paris!" cried Marthe. "Your life has always been a sheltered one and you don't understand such places!"

"Then I must try to make François understand," he said, as he took up his hat.

Guillaume inquired his way from a beggar near the Little Bridge and the man said: "That would be fat Margot and I can certainly show you the way, sir. Everybody knows it these days, although what a reverend gentlemen of your sort should want in such a house is beyond me. The only priestly gowns seen there are torn and marked with the stains of wine or food; but your business is your own, and if you'll step this way I'll lead you to the house. The streets are narrow and twisting behind the cathedral and you would probably lose your way."

The beggar was an honest-looking fellow with iron-grey hair and a direct, independent manner. He walked with Guillaume but a little to one side, as a mark of respect to the priest's gown, and he began to tell of Margot's house, saying that it was so popular that it must be the most flourishing in all Paris.

"Do you know François Villon?" asked Guillaume.

"Do I know my own brother!" cried the beggar. "Aye, that I do know François Villon, and a rare card he is. It is said that Margot's custom depends on him and I can well believe that, for there never was such a one to tell a merry story. He writes poetry, too, which people flock to hear, knocks it off as easy as winking, and when it's read, the whole room is roaring with laughter. He's always making game of someone: the priests, the King, the professors, the police, the harlots themselves, all come alike to his pen. But I will say that François Villon is generous with his money. He's good to us beggars, we're never turned away empty from his door, and so we all cry: 'Long life to François Villon!' But there, reverend sir, is the house, just over the way."

"You say that François Villon is good to you?"

"Aye, sir, the best man in Paris for us beggars. Thank you for the money but I needed none, as it is a pleasure to be doing a small service for a man of your cloth. You'll one day be doing a greater for me." And, with a profound salute, the man went back the way they had come.

Guillaume was warmed by the news that François was kind to men poorer than himself. And as he looked at the house he wondered if it was wise to go inside. As he pondered the question, he set himself to wait in the sun on the opposite side of the street, wondering what he could usefully say to his nephew and how best to say it.

It was late afternoon and, although a fine spring day, citizens and scholars were arriving at the house desultorily, in twos and threes. Guillaume wondered how they could attempt to enjoy themselves indoors on such a day, when they might be playing tennis or wandering in the Pré-aux-Clercs or inspecting the grape-vines

outside the walls of the town. It somehow depressed him to think that François should not be enjoying the spring of the year, that he preferred to shut out the sun when he might be watching the flash of the kingfisher amongst the willows or the horses on the tow-path dragging the barges or listening to the lap of the Seine as it sulkily heaved against the shingle. Thought of the river recalled the last fishing expedition he had made with François two years before at Argenteuil, and the canon was recalling the bitter-sweet memory of that warm day, with hardly a word between them, when the door of the tavern was thrown open from the inside and a struggling citizen appeared, with Colin de Cayeux holding one arm and François the other.

"See, my friend, we have no time to waste on funny fellows of your sort," said Colin. He leaned his intimidating height over the man and pulled his beard until he yelled for mercy. Then Colin took his collar and shook him until his teeth must have rattled. "Next time you want a little diversion from your wife, see you provide yourself with sufficient money!"

He gave the man, one of the small-trader class, a kick and he was glad to scuttle off down the street. Colin went back into the house but François lingered irresolutely for a moment in the doorway, as if glad to sniff the fresh air.

Guillaume saw that François was looking well. Instinctively the priest had expected sin to leave its mark, but François had even fattened out a little, a thing that seemed impossible for such a rake of a man. His cheeks were not so sallow nor his beak of a nose quite so prominent, but Guillaume did notice that there were dark rings round his eyes. The eyes too had a brilliance that was more feverish than ever.

"And the eyes, never forget, are the mirror of the soul," the priest muttered. "The eyes, never forget, are the mirror of the soul." The platitude was somehow comforting. He recalled it many times in the scene that followed and clutched as it gratefully, as if it were a holy talisman to save his mind.

When François caught sight of his uncle moving across the road, blank amazement showed in his face. He stared unbelievably, his jaw fell, and his body stiffened under the gown. But he quickly recovered himself and a broad grin of amusement slowly spread over his face. He flushed and his lips twitched as if he was going to burst out laughing. But his eyes had no laughter in them: they were cold and hostile. He turned back to the street and calmly awaited his uncle, no sign of welcome on his face.

Guillaume stopped, looking uncertainly at his nephew, white hair blowing gently in the spring breeze.

"I am glad to see you still wear your gown, François," he said, at last.

"Gown! Why, yes, true enough I do wear my gown, friend," said François, suddenly coming to life. "Surely I wear it, nothing would persuade me to part with it. But please do not delude yourself. You'll be thinking that I wear the rag for sentimental reasons, to remind me of the days when I was happy and respected and learned and had an honourable career in front of me. But, my dear sir, I assure you your guess would be sadly off the mark! The simple fact is that our customers like to be reminded that they are being waited on by a learned student, one who discoursed with the professors and theologised with the priests. It adds an interesting piquancy to the drink. That is why my gown is so useful, sir, and I wouldn't be without it for worlds!"

The grin on Villon's face broadened and his eyes became more and more malevolent. A restless excitement had seized hold of him, it was as if a drug was lashing his brain, and he hurriedly went on to ask Guillaume how he had found him out.

"But never mind how you did it," François answered himself. "After all, it's not surprising. The only surprise is that you hadn't heard of me before. Saint-Benoît is an out-of-the-way hole or else you would know the fame I have earned here. Ah, not fame of the grave sort that you planned for me but a more lively fame. Do you know that even the Dauphin, in disguise, is said to have honoured us with his presence, and that he came simply to hear my poetry? There are many whoremongers in Paris but none who can talk and write like me, let me tell you. The monks of Saint-Benoît would think it nothing, looking down their solemn clerical noses, but it's by no means everybody who could do it. Despite Margot's love for me, I have to rely entirely on my own wits and talents, and they alone would keep us all in comfort. Come, surely that's not to be sniffed at, that's by no means to be despised? But now you have come across me, there's no doubt you have come to preach me a sermon——"

"I have no such intention, my idea was simply to see you," began Guillaume, trying to pull his mind together.

"Nobody can hope to tell lies so glibly as a priest, not even a whoremonger; priests have so much practice!" interjected François, with a sneer. "But your reverence will allow me to tell you that in this house there is one sort of talk and one sort only that is not allowed. Every other kind we have, the bawdy, the drunken, the loving, the seductive, but the sermon is forbidden. You, as a learned sophist, might argue that both of us are not in the house, that you stand outside and therefore the ban does not apply to you——"

A new idea suddenly struck François. He grinned again, more like a monkey than ever, and started to bow to his uncle, an exaggerated obeisance in which his head nearly touched the ground.

"But what am I thinking of to keep your honour standing outside in the open!" he cried. "You must certainly come inside for a drink, yes, come inside for a drink. My friends are worth meeting and none of them would ever forgive me if I let you go away without meeting them. It will be the proudest moment of their lives, don't have any doubt of that, sir. You must certainly come in for a drink. What was I thinking of to let you stand outside? I am not usually so lax in attending on possible customers or else I'd soon get kicked out!"

He held the door open with a flourish and stood bowing on the threshold. Guillaume hesitated and then walked into the house. François seemed taken aback for a second but, recovering himself, he led his uncle through the outer room of the tavern. A number of students were drinking at a table with some girls, roaring out a drinking song:

"Let us drink wine—And sing with hearts clear and fine!

—Alleluia!

He who drinks no wine—Doesn't know eight from nine!

—Res Miranda!"

"A different sort of wisdom from that they have to display in the rue de Fouarre!" shouted François, above the din.

He took his uncle into the privileged inner room, which was comparatively quiet. There were found Colin de Cayeux, just pouring himself a drink after his return from the front door; Regnier de Montigny and Little Jean playing a friendly game of glic; Guy Tabary repairing a lute-string, and Margot herself, mending some clothes by the fireside. There were a few customers and some of the girls in the room, but it was a slack hour.

At their entry all Villon's friends looked up, and appeared petrified with surprise at sight of the venerable canon, whom they all knew by sight. There was a dead silence, broken only by the scrape of steel as Colin, expecting to see the police behind them, drew his sword. François had been watching their embarrassment with great glee, turning his head to look first at Margot, then at Guillaume, savouring the full implications of the position, rubbing his hands together and hardly able to keep still in his excitement. But he waved Colin's sword back.

"No need to worry, Colin. This is a friendly visit paid to you by my uncle, the reverend canon of Saint-Benoît. It was made at my request. I told him that you would never forgive me if I let

him go away without seeing you. I trust I interpreted your wishes correctly, comrades?"

François looked round at them, cocking his head on one side with an ingratiating smile like an auctioneer. Colin sat down, winked at him and, crossing one leg comfortably over the other, prepared to enjoy the entertainment he felt was coming. The others were still bemused and Villon's eye rested maliciously on Margot, who was trying to appear as inconspicuous as possible in her corner.

"Well, gentlemen, let me make you known to each other," continued François, gravely. "This, sir, is Colin de Cayeux, graduate of University and Master of Arts. I recommend this gentleman to you particularly, for he is my chief guide and mentor."

The position of the priest pleased Colin's cynical humour and, greatly enjoying himself, he jumped to his feet like a mountebank and made the canon an exaggerated bow.

"Here, sir, you have Regnier de Montigny, the most promising member of a noble family, also graduate and Master of Arts."

Regnier appeared disdainful of the whole business but he bowed abruptly to the canon and picked up his cards again.

"This little fellow here is Guy Tabary, of similar scholastic ability to his two friends, and, in addition, a man who writes a good legal script, especially valuable for the copying of poetry. And next to Regnier is Little Jean, who represents the only male blot on our learning. But I assure you he has other accomplishments which more than atone for his lack of the humanities. Yet Jean is a shy, retiring fellow and he would doubtless prefer that I should not speak of his other qualities. As for women, they need no learning, one doesn't gild the lily, and in Margot here, my most charming mistress, I protest that I have the brightest flower of her sex, although she is certainly no lily."

Margot flushed to the roots of her hair, the sweat stood out in beads on her forehead, and she stared helplessly at the canon, her mouth opening and shutting in ludicrous fashion.

Despite the ridiculous position in which he had been placed, Guillaume de Villon had lost none of the dignity that was natural to him. He sat upright in his chair, both hands placed on top of his walking-stick, quietly waiting to see what would come next.

Margot at last succeeded in her efforts to speak: "Reverend father, I should like to say——"

But François would not allow it: he broke in, talking faster than ever. "Our learned brother in Christ, Brother Baude, will regret his absence from this house to-night. Involved and learned your talk would have been had the brother been with us," said François.

"But Brother Baude's name naturally calls drink to my mind and I am sure you will try one of our rare vintages. Burgundy it was, I believe, sir, your favourite wine? If you will allow me, I will fetch a vintage that will, I think, please you."

François put a napkin over his arm and ran to get drink in exaggerated imitation of a decrepit serving-man: shuffling his feet, wiping his nose on the back of his hand, and bowing left and right in excessive humility, he asked them for their orders.

"Please note the skill of your nephew, sir," he cried, returning to Guillaume with the Burgundy. "At long last, I have learned to do one thing properly and that is good. I polish goblets excellently well. I pour wine with never a trace of sediment to disturb the holy lips of our customers. My talent is very much admired in this house, sir."

"Your talent was much admired elsewhere," said Guillaume, placing the wine on the table untasted.

"But they do indeed know a good man when they see one and my work is of such social importance," said François, leering at Colin. "I really do good to my fellow-men in this world. I don't pray for their souls in the next. When our customers come, so strong is my brotherly love for them that no matter what I am doing I leave it, and hasten to serve the dear men. I put a napkin over my arm, as I am doing now. I polish the goblets until they shine. I fetch them fruit and bread, whatever they ask, they've only to speak the word. Nothing is too much trouble. Their lordships must have the best of everything and I am the willing instrument of their desires. Is this not a proper humility? Show me a saint in the Christian calendar who practised a greater. Pure self-abasement. And when their highnesses are belching full, when they are stuffed with drink so that they gurgle as they walk, when other of their requirements have also been gorged, then, smirking and scraping one foot behind the other, I present the reckoning. If they pay generously, I say to them, bowing low: 'Return here, my good gentlemen, when you are again in heat, do not forget this brothel where we do you so well!'"

The others stared all the time at Guillaume, morbidly interested to see how he would take it. Colin seemed to be the only one actively enjoying the scene, whilst Margot was, for the time being, frightened out of her wits. But the canon gave no sign, either of embarrassment or anger. He sat watching François intently, striving to read his mind, preoccupied with him as if they were the only two in the room.

When François had finished his speech, he also stood watching his uncle's face, but what he saw there only goaded him to fresh

activity. With a high, cackling giggle he turned abruptly and ran across to Margot. He put his arm round her neck, kissed her on both cheeks, and sat himself on her knee.

"See here, uncle, the reward I get!" he cried. "I do what I do for love of her blue eyes, and don't you love the two ropes of her flaxen hair coiled round her ears? This is my Delilah, my troll, my salamander! When my work is finished for the day, then the night work begins! We go off to bed, rolling drunk, and there's myself, hoping for a little quiet sleep, but do you think it's sleep I'm getting? Not forty winks. There's no denying Margot, I'll tell you that. When she has made up her mind to a thing, then she'll take it herself, if necessary!"

He paused to allow all to observe Margot's embarrassment. She was ready to sink into the ground. Then he jumped excitedly from her knee and began striking attitudes again.

"But, mind you, we are not always so friendly!" he cried. "Not by any means! When we've had a bad day, and there's no money to put in the box, then I can't bear the sight of her. How I hate the fat bitch! I can't look at her. 'What! No money?' I cry, and seize her clothes, swearing to hold them in pawn until things are better. Margot swears she won't have this, by Christ, I'm to blame for the money, and, in the end, I am forced to take a stick and give her a hiding. Soon after, peace is made and Margot puts her ham of a fist on my shoulder, calling me Gogo, her ram, and crushes me in her great arms. I'm only a little chap, you see, but she'll not heed my cries and, to save her seed, she mounts on me. Groaning, there I am, squashed flat as a plank, and so she spoils me for a whoremonger, in this brothel where we do you so well!"

Only Colin laughed. The silence brooded over the whole house. Even the drinking song in the next room had stopped. Guillaume flushed slightly but still he sat watching François, waiting.

"Well, and why not?" shouted François, suddenly glaring at him defiantly. "Come wind, hail, or rain, my bread is cooked. I don't do so badly at all. I'm as snug as a bug in a rug. That's worth something, isn't it? All this talk of God and hell and sin: they're words, I tell you. I understand you when you talk of food and wine and women and comfort. Anyway, I am lewd, I tell you, and lewdness suits me! Who is worth most? I'll take my pleasure in this world, not the next. We all follow one behind the other, each is as good as the rest. I am quite at home, I tell you, reverend sir, with vileness of all sorts. I am not complaining, not a chance of that. I flee from honour, honour flees from me!"

Colin threw back his head in a loud guffaw and, seizing his chance

to get in a word, said that his pupil did him credit. "I didn't judge so badly that night I picked you up in the Mule, François!"

"Ah, you are his teacher, sir!" said Guillaume, looking steadily at Colin and inclining his head. "I wondered who had that distinction. He was my pupil, too, for a time."

But François did not hear them. He was staring wildly round the room, still cackling, and then he called one of the girls over to him. He could not get his words out quickly enough, it seemed he must keep on talking and talking.

"Here is a sample of the kind of goods we sell in this shop and nobody can deny that we give good value for money!" he cried, turning the girl round, his hand on the top of her head. "Note, gentlemen, the ripe breasts, the curve of the——"

But here Margot jumped up and shouted at him, shaking her fist in rage. "How can you carry on like this, François, you beast!" she cried. "Have you no shame at all! It is too much, and anyway, we are shutting up shop now. I'm the mistress here and I say we are shutting up shop. Come on out of it, all of you. I'll stand no more of it. It is too much. Get out, the lot of you!"

Colin began to argue, but the usually good-tempered woman was beside herself and looked quite capable of throwing them out on her own. "Come on, get out of it! We're shutting up shop now!" she kept on repeating distractedly.

And, in a short time, they were all hustled from the room, except François and his uncle. Margot then locked the door and came back to the canon.

"Now you two can have the talk you want, reverend sir, if you don't object to speaking in this house. How you must hate me, Father!" she said.

"God save you, my child, I don't hate you!" said Guillaume, patting her shoulder.

"I did what I thought was best at the time," said Margot, tears in her eyes. "François was not cut out for study and I feared his weakness would lead him to the gallows."

"Your mistake was that you considered only material things," said Guillaume. "It was kind of you to arrange for us to be alone. I was wondering how that could be managed."

"But I make no promises, Father, even if it means hell-fire for me!" cried Margot fiercely. "I will not try to influence François now. He can make his own decision, but if he goes, and later comes back to me, I shall take him! You couldn't expect me to give him up again!"

"To give so much is a great deal," answered Guillaume, "and I am grateful to you for it."

Awkwardly Margot knelt to receive his blessing and then, with a quick glance at François, she ran up to her room.

François was then sitting slumped in a chair, silent and dejected, scratching the table absentmindedly with the point of his dagger.

"She is a good woman," said Guillaume.

"Too good for me!" said François, throwing down his dagger and turning away from his uncle. "Did a viler man than me ever have breath in his body for twenty-four years? Twenty-four years I've crawled this earth like a beetle. A dung-beetle! The vilest of the vile. You must despise me utterly! Why do you bother about me? Leave me to crawl in the filth!"

"I was puzzled to know why you carried on like that," said Guillaume, still watching his nephew.

"That's what I was asking myself all the time I was playing the buffoon!" cried François. "What's the matter with you, fool! I was saying to myself. But something drives me on to play the buffoon, even when it's against my own interests or desires."

There was silence for a few seconds, then François grabbed his hat. "Come, let's get out of this place," he said. "The sooner you're away from here the better."

He took his uncle out of a private door at the back. It was still light outside and they set off for the Little Bridge and the rue Saint-Jacques.

"But I have my own idea of what was driving you on," said Guillaume. "I believe you are secretly ashamed of the life you have been leading."

"It's not true, uncle——"

"Then perhaps you will explain why you were so anxious to impress your vileness, as you call it, on my mind?"

"Maybe there is some truth in what you say," muttered François, after a pause. "I have at times been tormented with doubt, and thoughts of a better life and your wasted kindness have sometimes disturbed my sleep."

"Then why not listen to your doubts?" said Guillaume. "Come back before it is too late."

"To say that I am ashamed is an exaggeration," answered François. "We are never constant in our thoughts and feelings, at least I am not. And when I think of you, or see you as I have done to-day, a sort of shame does overcome me, but if I did not think of you, or had not seen you, shame would never have occurred to me and I should go on lusting with Margot and be happy. Can such shame be of any value?"

"It is better than nothing," muttered Guillaume.

"You are persuading yourself to think so, uncle. But I believe

I have gone too far and there is such a love of comfort in me that I feel I shall never get away. The spirit of hope and faith is not for me as it is for you. It never was. Before I left Saint-Benoît I had many times thought that it does not matter how we live. Life is short and we shall soon be rotting in our graves and we may as well make the best of it while we can. That is my credo, uncle, and points the difference between you and me."

Guillaume thought it best not to press the matter but when François left him outside Saint-Benoît, refusing to go in, the canon asked him to pay a visit occasionally. "Next week there falls Corpus Christi Day, the day of our procession, you remember. Why not visit me when that is over?"

"I will come," said François. "But I will wait on the stone bench outside the cloister under the clock in the rue Saint-Jacques. I've no wish to get the rough edge of Marthe's tongue."

Guillaume remembered that remark as he watched François down the street and it strengthened his hope that shame would yet bring his nephew back to Saint-Benoît.

CHAPTER IX

MEMORY of this talk with his uncle irked François and he was glad to get away from Margot's house on the evening of June 5th. Corpus Christi was a slack day in their trade. Most of the citizens had gone into the streets for the jollifications and so he came to Saint-Benoît earlier than intended and sat on the stone bench to await his uncle, half-asleep in the evening sun. It could not be imagined that the noisiness of the town would ever penetrate to that quarter and François fell to thinking of the community that had slumbered in that cloister for so many years. When he was living there, the cloister had seemed only impotent and tiresome, the frustration of nature. He had since made his life as gross and material as life could be, but now he felt that maybe there was nobility and purpose in this life the monks were trying to live, and even reward on this earth. Such stern denial might warp the minds of the weak but the successful strong must be the happy ones in this world. To be untroubled by women, by money, by the greed of possession, by the senses, by love of self: it was a fine dream, but he knew that the least part of it would never be for him. And what other men could be called happy? None that he knew

save those few men who had one talent and one purpose in life, pursuing it blindly to the exclusion of all other things. These men might be allowed their lusts and their passions: they could whore or tiddle or steal but it would be as if another man committed these acts, for their minds were away, wrapped up closely in the obsession of their lives, and it was true that these men lived only in their minds. These were the men of genius: the painters, the sculptors, the musicians, the poets. They too were happy, even in misery. But beneath these, there existed the swarming masses of men, living and dying like flies, with no idea of their purpose and little say in their own destinies. Their energies ran down many gutters and their strength was used up so finally they could be weak enough to die. These should be glad to die but François knew they were not. They would run from any danger, holding puny hands over their eyes, as he himself would run. There was no doubt that he was one of these unnamed millions, using up his life to no purpose, but at least he got more out of it than some of them. He was marching gaily to the grave with a laugh and fingers to his nose——

"It is not often you are to be seen in this part of the town, François."

A voice spoke at his ear and François saw a priest named Gilles, with his mistress, Isabeau, both smiling at his laziness. Gilles had been turned out of two livings because he persisted in bringing Isabeau to live with him. Their association was a joke in the taverns, for Gilles was a mild, scholarly priest whilst Isabeau was a tall, languid, and affected girl, with a plain face but a voluptuous, lithe body, the type that usually fell passionately in love with a man like Regnier de Montigny, sophisticated and reckless and strong. But their friendship had lasted several years, and although it was too much to expect Isabeau to display learning to match that of her lover, she tried to make up for it by an exaggerated and affected style of speech. The word "Really!" had only to be used in the taverns for everybody to smile and think of Isabeau and her incongruous lover.

Grudgingly François made room for them on the bench and explained that he was waiting for his uncle, who had asked him to be there that evening. "He is late and must have been delayed by the crush in the streets."

"Really, this day is insufferable!" said Isabeau. "The long processions, the perspiring citizens——"

"I used to enjoy it when I lived with my uncle," said François. "Perhaps I'm a simpler soul than you, Isabeau."

"Really!" said Isabeau, giving him a haughty stare.

"Your uncle is a good man," said Gilles, blinking behind his spectacles. "A pity more of the priests haven't his generosity of mind, for I should then be comfortable and sure of my next meal."

François remembered that these two were customers of Margot and tried to make himself agreeable and rouse out of his stupor. But as he smiled at Isabeau his attention was distracted by sight of a priest coming down the street, shouting and waving his arms, whilst a companion attempted to restrain his ferocity.

"Hello, there's trouble in store for somebody," said François.

All three of them turned to watch the priest, with his dishevelled hair and glaring eyes and open gown.

"Really, the fellow is enough to frighten a girl!" drawled Isabeau, patting her hair. "He must be out of his senses."

"He's no madman," answered François, "but a priest named Philippe Sermoise. I've seen him about the taverns, a peaceful sort of man, and he must be drunk to act like this."

"I believe he's really looking at you, François," said Isabeau.

"He can have no business with me," answered François. "I've never spoken to the man."

But the priest walked straight up to their bench and stopped in front of François, saying that he had been looking for him in all the usual haunts but nobody had known where he was.

"Now, praise be to God, I have found you at last!" Sermoise cried. "Believe me, I shall have the greatest pleasure in cutting off your ears and watching the blood flow down the gutter."

"What do you mean, what can you want?" demanded François. "So far as I know, I have done you no harm and there must be some mistake. My good sir, why have you lost your temper?"

And he got up to make room for the priest on the bench, but Sermoise refused this politeness and became more enraged than before. François sat down again with a shrug of his shoulders and watched the priest. Words choked Sermoise. He tried to speak but could only lick dried lips, and François felt a premonition of disaster as he saw the contorted face. He would have moved but he was still sun-dazed and had not been able to stir when Sermoise suddenly snatched a dagger from under his gown and struck down at him. The blow was a wild one but, although François instinctively jerked his head back, the blade gashed his lower lip and blood poured out over his chest.

He felt no pain and could not believe that it was his own blood. He sat in stupor, petrified, until a shout from Gilles, who was running away with Isabeau, warned him that Sermoise was about to strike again. He just avoided the blow by throwing himself

forward under the priest's arm, lurching on all fours to the ground. The movement brought him to his senses and he shivered with a prickling fear that steel would be in his back before he could move from his helpless position. His left hand had fallen on a large stone and, clutching it, he scrambled to his feet and backed away, drawing his own dagger as he did so. The priest was almost on top of him, a huge towering bulk of a man, foam flecking his lips. His friend called on François to disarm and run away before more damage was done. But Sermoise had caught up with François and struck at him again, his fury causing him to miss his mark, and as he floundered past, François made his own thrust, leaving the dagger stuck in the priest's side and throwing the stone in his face as he fell to the ground.

It was all over in a moment. Stupidly François stared down the street, deserted save for Gilles and Isabeau, now far away, and the still figure on the ground with the other priest bending over him. François watched Gilles and Isabeau until they had disappeared, white faces gazing fearfully over their shoulders, and suddenly he wanted to laugh, but instead he heard himself asking the other priest, called Jean le Mardi, how such a madman came to have his liberty and attack an unoffending man. Before Jean answered he sent a boy, who came out of the church of Saint-Benoît, running down the street to fetch a surgeon and then he said: "A woman was behind it, as they are behind every evil in this world."

"Not all are alike and only one has so far given me cause for complaint," muttered François.

"Your relations with women are notorious," said Jean, who was a thin man with pursed-up lips, a constant look of disapproval on his face and an air of being surprised at nothing he saw. "But Sermoise here is different. He lives a useful and honourable life. And now he has been brought to great hurt, maybe his death, by a woman. A woman called Catherine de Vausselles——"

"Catherine de Vausselles!" cried François.

"That's the name," said Jean, "and you should know it. My friend has been in love with this woman for a long time and, although he had been warned that she was worthless, he persisted in his infatuation. She was the first woman in his life and Philippe, like many of the quiet sort, a determined person used to his own way. When such men fall in love, nothing on earth will sway them. And Philippe did not get his own way. This Catherine kept him hanging about until he didn't know where he stood, tantalising him by raising his hopes one minute and dashing them the next, until he was ready for anything, and even I was losing patience with the demented fellow."

"I had the same experience myself with this Catherine——"

"But you evidently took matters into your own hands," said Jean. "For when we met to-day Philippe told me that last night Catherine had said she would satisfy his desire if he would take revenge on you. She declared that François Villon had brutally raped her. Philippe was certain that she spoke truth and was fighting mad against you, determined to have your blood. He would not listen to reason, unaccustomed lust had driven him lunatic. Even as we came down the street I was trying to dissuade him from violence, but he wouldn't even give you the chance to explain."

François stood listening to this answer and forgot to stanch the blood which flowed from his lip. The cruel sentences pierced his consciousness disjointedly but finally he stirred from his bewilderment and burst into hysterical laughter, sitting helplessly on the stone bench, with the blood on his face and clothes.

"Is it untrue that you raped her then?" said Jean.

"I haven't so much as seen her garter," cried François, "although I had hopes at one time. But I did meet her in the street some time back and explained where I was living, perhaps taunting her with my prosperity. She lost her temper and swore that she would get even with me. I soon forgot the incident but she is a mean woman, the meanest in Paris, and although she has no interest in me for herself, she could not bear to think of me in the arms of another woman, and especially a woman who gives me her love and a home as well. And so Catherine used this poor devil on the ground as a tool for her spite."

Jean le Mardi looked up from his examination of the fallen man and the two stared at each other, spellbound, cursing women and their power over men, held by pity for themselves and the man who had the dagger in his side.

At last Jean said: "It can't be helped. There's no need to let things become worse than they are, and if I were you I should make myself scarce. Philippe may be dying. If he recovers consciousness, you can rely on me to tell him that Catherine lied. People are beginning to gather round. You are weak from loss of blood and so off to get your wound dressed, whilst I take care of Sermoise."

People had begun to gather round. So Jean had said and François saw that the priest spoke truth. Slowly they were clustering in the subdued manner that an inquisitive crowd always has, with an underflow of talk beneath their quietness. François watched them with their heads together, nodding and murmuring whilst they stared at the man senseless on the ground, reminding

him of the birds to be seen at an execution, and he seemed to hear the tale spreading around the town.

"This will destroy any happiness in my life, I expect," he said.

"Women are the devil!" that was all the answer he could get from Jean. The words echoed in his mind, a requiem; and as he swayed there, with his arm over his face, a woman said that he had better see a surgeon.

"There is one just around the corner," she said, "the second turning on the right past the Mule and the second house down the street, you can't mistake it."

The directions had to be repeated and still François did not understand, but the woman, red-faced, broad, and capable, took hold of his arm and led him away, saying that her husband would have to wait for once in a way.

"Don't take me to Jean Flastrier," muttered François. "His cackle would drive me mad."

"This one is called Fouquet, I believe, so just keep quiet and save your strength."

"Would you keep quiet if you had just seen your life tumble in ruins?"

"Talking won't mend it," she answered, "and there's many a man killed another and still lived to enjoy a woman and a mug of beer."

"But I've a premonition——"

"Mind where you're going, my lad. You were nearly in the gutter that time," she said.

François clutched on to his companion. There came roaring noises in his ears and a voice afar off screaming incoherently, a voice he was surprised to recognise as his own, muttering he knew not what, and he was last conscious of a sense of elation that his faintness had been overcome.

A voice said: "He won't come to any harm. Just weakness from loss of blood."

François struggled to raise himself and saw that he was in a house with the woman who had been his guide and a man who was evidently a surgeon.

"I must see my uncle, where is he?" he muttered.

"Time enough for that when you have rested a little," said the surgeon. "Your face has been washed and dressed and I have blooded you. Your thanks are due to this young woman, who carried you here on her shoulders."

"Housework makes a woman strong and there's not much of him," she said. "But I must be going or else I shan't know my own name when my husband has finished with me!"

"Ah, that reminds me that I must have your name, young man, for my police record," said the surgeon.

The name of the police reminded François of his danger. He had to see Guillaume at once and, struggling to his feet, he told the surgeon that he had come upon his wound in a tavern brawl and that his name was Michel Mouton.

"Michel Mouton, in a tavern brawl," said the surgeon, writing.

"And now, if you'll wet my lips with a taste of wine, I'll pay your fee and be getting on with this saviour of mine," said François. "I shouldn't like her to have trouble with her husband!"

"Your name is not Michel Mouton," she said, when they were in the street. "Why did you lie to the surgeon?"

"They'll soon find out who I am but I had to gain time," said François. "Michel Mouton—not a bad name for the spur of the moment. I am, my dear, a runaway from the cloister and have lived with a woman in a somewhat disorderly house these eighteen months. That sort of thing doesn't look well at a murder trial!"

"Here is where I found you, on the corner by Saint-Benoît," she said. "But before I leave, will you tell me your real name?"

"François Villon."

"I've heard of François Villon," she said. "One of those who help to keep our husbands out at night, but I'm glad to have been of use to you. Most of my time is spent rubbing out clothes against the stones in the river. This will rank as an adventure in my life, I can tell you!"

"I don't know how to thank you," said François. "You probably don't want thanks from a scarecrow covered in blood and speaking through one side of his mouth, but one day I'll remember you in a poem."

"You're a little light-headed!" she said. "I hope you have not caught a fever. And now that you're home I'll hurry along, or else my husband will be taking the strap to me."

With a friendly grip on his arm she was gone, and François turned towards his uncle's house. The grey stones of Saint-Benoît welcomed him once more, the prodigal returned. Strong arms seemed to support him, giving back his presence of mind, and he went to Marthe's kitchen, asking if his uncle had come back yet.

"He's in his room," she said. "Worried to death, as usual. Things have come to such a pass that he doesn't know what to expect next. That's what you have done to him!"

"I must see him, Marthe, I must see him, I tell you!"

"What! With a bloody face like that!" Marthe cried. "You'd be scaring the poor man out of his wits!"

François wasted no more time in argument but pushed the old woman to one side and hurried to Guillaume's study.

"It was you then!" cried Guillaume, who was pacing up and down the room. "When they told me the story, I had a premonition that you were concerned. How I wish I had never asked you here!"

"That made no difference, uncle. This man was so mad against me that he would have found me out wherever I had been, in your house or even in the sanctuary of church itself."

"You had done him a great wrong then, François?"

"For once, I was in the right!" cried François. "Why, I hadn't even spoken to the priest!"

"Sit down, François, and tell me how it happened. Take your time for I can see that you speak with difficulty, so badly is your poor mouth wounded. In the meantime, Marthe shall fetch you wine and light food."

When Marthe returned, the tale was told and François crying out on the fate that had called him back to Saint Benoît only to commit murder.

"You are hysterical," said Guillaume. "If your story is true, you know well enough that it is not murder. The poor deluded man too may not die——"

"I feel that he will," said François, "and so would you if you had seen him lying there, with the dagger sticking out of him."

"Even so, François, his death would not be murder but killing in self-defence. All we have to consider is the possibility of his death being made to look like murder. The only witness, or at least the witness whose word would be taken in a court of law, is a friend of the wounded man."

"He said he would speak for me," muttered François.

"Maybe he will do so then," said Guillaume, "but perhaps his mood will change. We cannot take risks and I think the wisest course is for you to get out of Paris at once. The disorderly way you have been living for the last eighteen months will tell against you. That's the chief danger, to my mind. Therefore you had better travel under another name, any name—say des Loges—and if the police come for your arrest their task will be made more difficult. You can also buy a pedlar's pack, for they would not connect François Villon with a pedlar. But you needn't sell the goods. I'll give you an introduction to a monastery near Port-Royal. I can easily send messages there and you will have a safe hiding-place until this trouble has blown over. The pardon shall be made out, for safety, in the names of Villon and des Loges."

"You are a versatile man, sir," François said. "It might be

thought that you had spent your whole life devising plans to outwit the police!"

"It is a relief to me to know the worst," said Guillaume. "Unknown fears have haunted me these last months, when you were away from here. In my dreams, I have seen you carried home to me on a shutter, a knife in your back, or have walked through the Place Maubert to see you dangling from a gibbet and, in my waking hours, sight of the Petit Châtelet has been enough to cast a chill over me!"

Realisation of his uncle's suffering came to François. He could not look him in the face. But his pity was suddenly obscured by a gust of anger when he thought of the woman to blame for his misfortune and, gathering his last strength, he jumped to his feet and cursed Catherine de Vausselles. His show of temper was interrupted by Guillaume, who broke in to say that he must get rancorous thoughts out of his mind.

"The woman may have been the instrument of your downfall," Guillaume said, "but this violent accident is the natural outcome of your own undisciplined way of living. You must look at it in that way for your own peace of mind, and I want you to promise that on your return, if I can get you the pardon, you will abandon your companions and leave the house in which you have been living."

"There is no alternative," answered François. "I shan't fix the noose around my own neck. But I should like to send Margot a message before I go away."

"It would be too dangerous," said Guillaume. "You couldn't go yourself and what do you think Marthe would say if she was asked?"

Guillaume saw that François was at the end of his strength, lacking power to make the answer he wished, and so the canon urged him to get to bed and rest. "Your room has been kept ready, François, and by now you may be sure that Marthe has well aired the sheets. Do not forget that you must be ready to travel first thing in the morning, for you can't risk more than a few hours here. You can delay only to say good-bye to your mother, telling nothing to alarm her but saying that you are going to a monastery."

François was beyond talk and glad to let Guillaume and Marthe help him upstairs to bed. He had no recollection of his clothes being slipped off and, as he lay staring at the ceiling, the last words he heard had barely the time to repeat themselves in his consciousness before he was asleep.

CHAPTER X

SEVEN months later, in January 1456, Marthe opened the door to François on his return from the monastery, and as she saw him standing on the doorstep a sudden and inexplicable pity came over her. She was not a woman liable to sudden fancies of intuition but, although François appeared unembarrassed as he stooped in his exhilaration to kiss her, she believed there was a change in the boy. He had grown to be a man in those few months, she thought, and a sombre man at that. But as she listened to him running on cheerfully about Paris, and his joy to be back in the town again, Marthe felt she had been dreaming and that maybe it was the long scar running down his chin that had caused her imagination to run wild. He was the impudent youth she had always loved as her own son, although that would never have been guessed from her brusque manner towards him. But trust him for knowing it, she thought, and getting whatever he wants out of me.

"The master is waiting for you in his room," she said. "Ever since we got the pardon, he has been on edge, hardly able to eat."

"Don't believe all she tells you, François," cried Guillaume, who had been unable to wait in his study. "She sometimes imagines her own worries are mine." And leading the way back to his own room, he said no time must be lost in speaking of Saint-Benoît.

"Did you find these seven months pass quickly or slowly?"

"Time dragged itself away," answered François.

"For me too it went badly," said Guillaume, "although I had to occupy myself with the pardon from the King. That task was a relief to me. Fortunately, the pardon went through very quickly, seven months being no time at all for legal matters."

"I don't know how to thank you," cried François. "It must have cost you a lot of money to save my worthless life."

"Certainly one of my houses had to be sold," answered Guillaume; "but you know I don't mind that."

"I know you'd give every penny you've got for me," said François.

Guillaume changed the conversation and they spoke of poor Sermoise and his death. "Sermoise was carried to a house in this cloister, where his wounds were dressed," said Guillaume, "and next day he was transferred to the Hôtel-Dieu for treatment. There, within the week, as your pardon says, either for lack of

proper attention or other causes, he died. But I think he had proper attention, as I was paying for it myself. The important point was that in answer to an examiner from the Châtelet, who asked if Sermoise would wish his assailant to be punished, the priest answered that he had reason to forgive him. He would not specify his reasons and I suppose that, even in the face of death, a man does not like to appear foolish and confess that a woman has duped him. But his forgiveness made my task easier."

"So Jean le Mardi did as he said he would do," muttered François. "I wonder what Sermoise said when he heard that Catherine had been using him to suit her own ends. I expect the two friends looked at each other across the bed in the same way that Jean and I gazed over Sermoise's body as he stretched on the ground, both cursing the domination of woman over man, and Sermoise glad that he would soon be out of it. He would be happy to turn his face to the wall and die. A man who has not known women is an idealist and he takes it hard when his ideals are shattered."

"Perhaps it happened as you say," answered Guillaume. "The will to live had left him, but by his forgiveness, and a present to the Church, your life with Margot was overlooked—the pardon speaking of you as a man who had lived well and honourably, without ever being accused before."

"The only certificate of good conduct I've ever had," said François, "and even that is somewhat spoiled by the hesitancy of the last phrase."

"It's no laughing matter," answered Guillaume.

"I know that, uncle, and am not really laughing. I'm a little distraught at finding myself back in Paris with you again. Every stone of the town is dear to me and I can't be happy outside the place. The country seemed to me to be much overrated by the poets and I never found pleasure in fields and trees. The quietness frightened me and, now that I've had my first taste of the country, I never want to leave Paris or see a green field again. To live and sleep in the midst of such silence only upsets me. I have got used to the clatter of the cobblestones and the noises of a town."

"Your mind was not at rest or else I'm sure you'd appreciate the beauty of France. I have sometimes wished that I could take you to Burgundy, which is becoming nothing more than a beautiful memory to me, but I am afraid the roots are torn up and I too should be unhappy away from Paris."

"Don't think of it again!" cried François. "I know that I should never be happy in the country, even if I had a house and estate."

And Guillaume next asked if the brothers had been kind to François in the monastery and if they kept a well-regulated house.

"Their house was certainly orderly and they were as kind as such austere men could well be. They left me to myself, doubtless acting on your instructions, for the religious can't usually resist such a promising subject for conversion: a man flying from the law with a fear of death ever in his mind. I noticed several of them regarding me with sidelong, hungry looks when they thought my attention was elsewhere."

"Your troubles and the killing of Sermoise have not taught you respect for religion," answered Guillaume, "and I am sorry that you can speak with all your old-time levity. I hope you will come to like the priests better."

"I'm sorry, uncle," said François. "It's become a habit with me, but I'll try to regulate my tongue with more respect."

"I don't like to counsel hypocrisy, François, but you must be more careful both in what you say and the way you live. I have been warned that the authorities will keep a sharp eye on you. My influence is not unlimited, neither is my purse, and should you be indicted for any offence, however small, a pardon is not certain. My opinion is that the authorities will seize on the smallest excuse to teach you a lesson and the Church will not be too anxious for your protection. The poem you wrote has not been forgotten."

"Your arguments are unanswerable," said François, "and I too have given the matter much thought, having had overmuch time for thinking in the last seven months. I shall make no attempt to take up with Margot again. I've had my lesson and the police will not be bothered again by the name of François Villon. What a relief that will be for Robert d'Estouteville! He had become friendly with me, often visiting our house in his private capacity, you understand, and it must have been a rare embarrassment to him whenever my name was mentioned in his office. Maybe I shall occasionally visit Margot for the sake of old times. She has been good to me and there can be no harm in taking a drink with her and some of my old friends."

"You must keep right away from her," cried Guillaume, "for otherwise you will be led back to your old ways. I must insist that you do so. I cannot have you taken away from me again."

François saw that the canon was much put out and so promised he would not see Margot and her friends again. The talk passed on to discussion of the work François might obtain, Guillaume declaring that nothing could be hoped for until his reputation had been lived down. "In the meantime, you must try to make yourself

useful about the affairs of the community here. Sometimes there will be interesting work for you as my assistant in our law-suit against Notre-Dame. It is all I can offer you and I hope you will find peace, both for your sake and my own."

For the time being, it was sufficient to be back in Paris and, whilst he wandered the streets as of old, François hoped that he would never again have to leave the town he loved.

But soon the old restlessness came over him. The anxious, secret look his uncle gave him when he was away from the house overlong irritated him and Marthe did not try to hide her remarks about the devil finding work for idle hands. The students he met in the streets always asked him why he did not show up at Margot's house, saying that it was dull without him and that Margot was fretting herself to a shadow. The promise to his uncle had to be broken and one afternoon, when Guillaume had gone to inspect a house he owned, François slipped furtively over the Little Bridge and into the familiar house. Margot was overjoyed to see him.

"I made a promise to my uncle not to see you and, at the time, I was fool enough to believe that I should keep it," said François, kissing her. "But now I am here, I see that it was impossible. Your blue eyes have stared at me reproachfully each night that I went to bed."

"I've been lonely enough for my thoughts to draw you back to me," Margot answered. "But I believed you would look me up as soon as possible. And now that we are back, I've already asked myself if you are coming to this house to live with me again. Shall we be happy together as we were before that fool of a priest attacked you?"

"There's not much choice," said François. "My uncle tells me that the police will keep their eye on me in future. He has had certain information that if I come back to live with you my death warrant would be as good as signed."

"God forbid!" cried Margot. "But we must count our blessings in this world and you'll be able to come and see me, unless that's too much of a risk."

"I shall come, Margot, dangerous or not. I made a promise, as I have told you, but how could it be kept? I would rather die than lead such a drab, pointless existence. What the future holds I can't say but it looks doubtful for me and so I am living for the present. It's the only possible way to live, an art to be cultivated. Take whatever pleasure you can from each hour whilst it is here. Never mind the last hour or the one to come, single-minded devotion to each hour that is given us and afterwards throw it over your shoulder! There may be precious few left to us!"

Colin then came into the room, with his arm round Isabeau, and greeted François effusively.

"Why, what is this new arrangement?" said François, looking from one to the other. "What has happened to Gilles, your tame priest, Isabeau? Did the shock of seeing me stabbed finish him?"

"The word for Gilles is certainly tame," answered Isabeau. "Really, I can't think what I was at to put up with him for so long."

"And what has happened to the poor bewitched cleric?"

"He still hangs about me," drawled Isabeau, crossing her long, sleek legs. "I shall really have to put Colin on to the man. He's becoming a nuisance."

"Yes, we've come to an understanding," said Colin. "Such a figure was wasted on a doddering priest. But you understand that I still have the same ideas. I'm swearing no vows of fidelity to Isabeau."

"So tiresome, don't you think, François?" said Isabeau. "And really one doesn't know whether one means them or not, even at the most passionate moments."

"True, my queen," said François, grinning, his eyes on her legs and slender waist, shown off to perfection in a clinging gown of white satin.

"But that doesn't mean I'm disposed to share with you, my lad," said Colin, noticing the direction of his glance.

"He'd best keep his eyes to himself, why he's only come back a minute and was just making me promises," cried Margot. "Yet he must needs——"

"And how have you been living these months of your exile, François?" interjected Colin, diplomatically seeking to change the subject. "A tale has been told in the taverns, told with bursts of gusty laughter, that you've been staying in a monastery, but nobody believed it. They said you might as well expect Pierre Abélard to be called for in a nunnery."

"The story was true," said François. "My uncle gave me an introduction to a monastery near Port-Royal and there I went in all haste, glad enough to hide my head."

"Did they make you toll the bell?" cried Colin. "And knock your head on the cold stones of the chapel each morning?"

"A little of that couldn't be avoided," answered François.

"But you don't mean to tell me that François Villon didn't find something to relieve the monotony. The man who used to entertain all Paris must have done something to amuse himself. He couldn't have chanted prayers for seven months."

François hesitated, glancing apprehensively at Margot's face, which was already surly because of Isabeau, but Regnier de

Montigny, Guy Tabary, Brother Baude, and Little Jean had come in whilst Colin was speaking. They greeted François boisterously and cried for the tale to be told. François never could resist an audience and, with a grin of delight, he said that he had found amusement in a most unlikely quarter.

"One day, having nothing to do and being more and more tired of the chattering monks, I visited a neighbouring village called Bourg-la-Reine. There I fell in with a barber, a man after our own hearts called Perrot Girart, and after a few drinks we became such friends that he said he would do for me what he would do for no other stranger. 'What's that?' I asked. 'Why,' he said, 'I'll take you to visit a local abbey at Port-Royal, better known as Pourras, where you'll find I'm a privileged visitor.' I thought he must be drunk and shouted that I'd just come from a monastery and was going to no more religious houses. But he only laughed, saying that I'd never seen a house like this one, and finally to humour the fellow, as after all he had paid for the drinks, I went along with him. 'The abbey,' he said, 'is very poor, so poor indeed that there is only one novice, but the interest is not in the building. Our entertainment will come from the abbess herself, named Huguette du Hamel. She has only been appointed about a year but she's a real character, there's no doubt about that, a real character.' I tried to make him tell me what was so peculiar about the woman but he would only smile knowingly and tell me that I'd soon find out for myself. When I saw the abbess, I thought there might be something in what he said. She was a woman getting on for forty, handsome, with a strong body and a bold roving eye. You would have taken her for a prostitute rather than a priestess. And although not a prostitute, she was certainly a wanton. Instead of prayers and ave marias, all I heard from her lips were tales of the nights she had dressed up as a man and mixed with the crowds in the neighbouring towns on market and feast days. The barber was delighted at my astonishment and, talking to me on the side, asked if I knew of another district which could boast such an abbess. 'She likes you,' he said, 'and she'll probably ask you to take a bath with her.' 'Take a bath?' I cried. 'Yes,' the barber answered, 'for that's the sign of her greatest favour. A bath together and afterwards bed.' Sure enough, my friends, he was a true prophet. The abbess soon after sent away her procurer and my friend the barber, saying that it was not often she saw a face different from those she saw every day, it was a relief to see a town face."

"And you're not telling us that you took a bath with the abbess?" cried Regnier.

"It was a chance not to be missed," answered François. "There

are not many men who can say that they have bathed and bedded with an abbess and you may be sure that much of my remaining time was spent at Bourg-la-Reine in the house of the barber, who fed me very well, the pork he served being an especially fragrant memory."

The tale of how François Villon enjoyed himself whilst awaiting pardon was vastly enjoyed by them all and François could see that the story would be repeated in every tavern in Paris, distorted as it passed from mouth to mouth, adding to the legend of his own name that had already been created by his poetry and way of living in Margot's house.

Margot herself was the only one displeased and her good-natured, plump face looked stern as she said that such women, living under the false pretences of religion, were a shame and disgrace to the country. "I'd have them whipped at the tail-board of a cart," she cried.

"Why, you're a fine one to shout!" said Colin.

"At least I'm not a hypocrite," retorted Margot, "and I'll leave you to continue your tales of the woman who takes up with any good-for-nothing that comes along, instead of praying for our souls, as she should be doing."

And as the door slammed behind her Regnier said that she would soon come round. "It's a pleasure to see her in a temper again," he said. "She has been unbearably silent since you were away and now the pleasures of argument have come back to the house."

"A sign of life," answered François, "and I promise that we shall not become dull again. I intend to be here in the day-time as often as before, I can tell you."

That at least was a promise he was eager to keep, and in the following spring and summer months he was a regular visitor. And the trade of Margot's house soon returned when word passed round that François Villon was back with new tales to tell and a long slash down his chin, the forfeit he had had to pay for the getting of them.

But one day, in the November of that year, François found that his best stories and jokes could not please Margot or any of his friends. Even Guy Tabary took no interest in him and, cutting short in his useless story, François turned to Margot and asked what had come over them all.

"You sit here without a word between you," he cried, "drinking your wine as if it is tasteless, throwing the dice as if you are playing on your own tombstones, newly risen from the dead."

"I've received notice from the police that my house must be shut down by the end of the year," Margot answered.

"Why be downcast over that order?" said François. "All it means is that the police want a bigger bribe."

"I've made many offers, François, and the last time I told them to name the amount of money they wanted, but even that offer was turned down. It seems that we must be turned out soon."

"But I can't understand it," said François. "We've been doing nothing different from what we have always done and the police have taken our money before."

But Margot's thoughts were away from him and she began to lament the comfortable house she was to leave and the prosperous life they were losing. "I shall have to start all over again and build up a trade in some other quarter," she cried, "but with the police against me, there's not much chance of success. I feel my life will never be happy again."

"You're hiding something from me," said François. "Why was I the last to hear the news which is so vital to us all?"

He stared round the room, waiting an answer, but the others looked uneasily at each other and took no notice of him. François sensed antagonism and sat wondering what he had done to offend them, until Colin, muttering an oath, flung down the dice he was using and said the truth was that Margot had not told him all there was to be told.

"She omitted to say that she had a strong hint from the police that a churchman was behind this ban and that, much as they'd like to take our money, they dared not do so."

"A churchman, Colin?" said François. "How can we have offended a churchman?"

"You'd better be asking yourself, François, for you've the best reason for knowing."

And suddenly François saw what was in their minds but he cried out that they were mistaken. "My uncle would never do such a thing. He's not a man of action but a dreamer, who likes nothing better than to sit amongst his books all day, alone with his dreams."

"Yet he could arouse himself to get your pardon," said Margot. "I believe he'd work himself up to such a pitch that he could do anything for you."

"He never condemns others, Margot, and he would not think of such a trick."

François continued eager in his argument for he wished to still the flicker of doubt in his own mind, but his words were useless, beating in vain against the wall of their scepticism. But the truth could soon be discovered and, telling them to wait, he rushed from the house.

Somehow he reached Saint-Benoît and blurted out his question.

"They are speaking down yonder of the police," he cried, "and say that you are behind this ban on Margot's house. It must be some other churchman——"

"I don't like doing such things," Guillaume said. "But I knew that you had been visiting her house and realised that you would soon be dragged back to your old ways. I imagined you leaving Saint-Benoît once more with another note left on the table for me and the thought was too painful to be endured. The end I saw for you was the gibbet and, fear sharpening my old wits, I put in a discreet word with my friend the Provost."

The canon had evidently thought deeply before acting, but François did his best in argument and spoke especially of the trouble that would come to Margot. "She has been good to me and loves me deeply in her own way," he said. "It's a shame that through her love she should have to suffer and I'll promise that, if she can only be left in peace, I'll never see her again."

"Your promise is useless, François, for you are too weak-willed to keep it. I am sorry for your Margot but you can tell her from me that if she cares to live in another town, far away from Paris, I'll recompense her loss, but the house in the Cité must be closed down. It is the only way to save you from yourself."

As François set out again for the Cité to tell Margot the unwelcome news he was surprised to find no resentment in his mind against Guillaume, despite the ill turn he thought he had been done. It was the old man's last desperate throw. But what was there left in life for him if Margot was taken away?

He came to a standstill and stared at the crowds jostling their way over the Little Bridge. He saw them as an eddy of impersonal, mask-like faces, each person intent on his own problems and sufferings. Their indifference stirred him out of his own thoughts, but as he stared, helplessly wondering at their heedlessness, the anonymity was broken by a face he well knew, that of Catherine de Vausselles. It was not remarkable that Catherine should be walking slowly towards him over the Little Bridge but he was amazed that she should appear at such a moment. He always connected her with any misfortune in his life, and as he watched her long, gawky stride he saw that she was ugly and hard of face, her soul showing in her mean little eyes. He did not understand how he could ever have thought twice about her and as she sauntered past, smiling sarcastically, her rottenness sent a prickly loathing over his body. In his mind's eye, he saw the priest, Sermoise, lying on the ground, an honest man killed by her spiteful lies, and the priest's friend, Jean, with himself, the killer, mourning the fate of them all. An uncontrollable fury seized him, and François broke

from his trance and grabbed Catherine by the shoulders, shouting obscenities and insults at the top of his voice, calling on the people to gather round and listen to the tales he had to tell of this whore and slanderer and murderess.

"Murderess!" they cried. And all was immediately confusion, some trying to get a better view whilst others struggled away from possible trouble, but François would not loose his grip of Catherine, however wildly she struggled or the crowd pressed. His hold on her wrists tightened, he would have liked to sink his teeth deep into her flesh and he pushed his face into hers, staring into her frightened eyes, asking if she remembered Sermoise and would like to follow that good man to the grave. Not even the warning cry of the police disturbed him but soon his arms were seized from behind, knees pressed in his back and a bandage was thrown over his eyes.

The shock and sudden darkness frightened him. He came to himself with all the strength gone from his limbs and found himself listening to the impersonal voices of the sergeants as they dragged him through the streets to prison.

"A madman, I suppose?" one of them said.

"Not at all," answered his companion, "but François Villon, a notorious poet recently returned from seven months' holiday in the country after a stabbing affair. I know his uncle, a priest living in Saint-Benoît, and he'll be in sorrow to-night. It will go hard with his nephew, attacking and reviling in public a lady of good name. These cases are getting too frequent and the court will give rough treatment to the next offender. A hundred lashes and another dose of the country at the very least, you can take my word for that."

CHAPTER XI

THE judges were indeed in no lenient mood when François was hauled before them from the straw of the Châtelet. It happened that a number of women of high station in Paris had recently been attacked by rejected lovers. The attack had not always been physical, the despised lover had sometimes been content to pin an obscene couplet to the lady's door reflecting on her honour, but the judges took as harsh a view of this as in the case of actual violence. They were warming to their work, and in this case of François Villon they knew their hands were free. The Church would not

reclaim him. Neither his recent escape from punishment after killing a man nor the poem he had written nor his living with Margot were forgotten. The churchmen would not be sorry to see him given a sharp lesson.

François told the judges of his provocation and of Catherine's spiteful lie which had resulted in the death of Sermoise, but the only witness to it, Jean le Mardi, happened to be out of Paris and François was not believed. The outcome was a sentence of fifty lashes, to be given by the public executioner of Paris, and a banishment from the town for six months, to date from the end of that year, 1456.

Great humiliation had to be endured as well as pain, for François was given his whipping outside Catherine's house. He was tied to a cart-wheel and Catherine stood laughing on her balcony, with Noel de Jolis by her side, as she had done on the night of the serenade, that now seemed so far away to François. There she stood watching the lash bite into his flesh and his blood reddening the snow. As he afterwards said, François was beaten "like dirty linen in a stream" and, the executioner's arm being a strong one, he was dragged away more dead than alive.

But, in the long run, his banishment from Paris was the worst part of his punishment. His uncle had not given him up, he felt that Fate had dealt hardly with François in this last clash with authority, as well as in the matter of the priest, but he had been unable to get the sentence of six months' banishment cancelled. His only consolation was that six months would soon pass.

But François knew they would not pass quickly for him. His spell in the country had seemed an age to him before, even with the consolation provided by the Abbess of Pourras; but there was nothing he could do and a week before Christmas, 1456, he went to Margot's house to say good-bye to his friends.

There he found the atmosphere much changed. They told him that, under the order from the police, that day was the last Margot's house could be open.

"As I sat in the straw of the Châtelet I often thought of this place," François said, "and now I am returned only to join in the melancholy farewell. Her house cannot be shut, I said, a miracle will save her, and now no miracle has taken place."

"Why this useless talk of miracles?" asked Colin, who was sitting gloomily listening to Isabeau describing a new gown she had bought. "The Pope himself couldn't save this house now. Margot will start afresh in a new house to-morrow."

"What chance do you think I stand in any house with the police against me?" cried Margot.

"Now that François has been sent away from Paris for six months the police will lose their reason for persecuting you," said Colin, glad to escape from Isabeau.

"And who will bring the customers back to me?" asked Margot. "Guy Tabary dressed up as a monkey, likely enough——"

"François and the prosperity of this last year or two have spoiled you, Margot," interjected Regnier, who was playing cards, as usual, with Little Jean, bottles by their side. "You did well enough before he came."

"That's the root of the matter," said Colin. "You don't care to let François out of your sight even for six months, imagining that he'll be sleeping with a few more abbesses, I expect."

"There's a feeling upon me that this is a turning-point in all our lives," said Margot. "Besides, I spilt the salt to-day."

"Just a woman's fancy," said Colin, with his usual sneer. And then, addressing François, he went on to announce that he had important news.

"You must have heard me say that if the Coquillards were stronger in one part of France than another, then that part was round Dijon," he said, tapping François solemnly on the shoulder with his long forefinger. "And news has come that the authorities in Dijon have rounded up our friends and most are lying in prison, awaiting death."

His words struck greater fear into François than those of his judges when they sentenced him to flogging. That the powerful Coquillards might be broken up had never occurred to him.

"But even worse than this is the certainty that they have got hold of Regnier's name," continued Colin. "All those captured remained dumb under the worst tortures devised for them. Neither the rack nor the pouring of gallons of water into their guts caused these staunch lads to give their comrades away, but the authorities offered a pardon to the youngest of them, Dimache the Wolf, and a snivelling barber, Perrenet le Fournier. The temptation was too great, both turned informer, and Jean Rabustel, the Procureur of Dijon, was given an exact list of the Coquillards they knew. There were sixty-two names and the name of Regnier de Montigny was amongst them. That in itself would be sufficient reason for us to leave Paris but we have certain information that a start will soon be made on the Coquillards in this town. Therefore, rather than squirm in the prisons of Paris, with hot irons at our eyes and thumb-screws on our hands, Regnier and I have decided to leave Paris until matters have quietened down. Even the country is to be preferred to a prison!"

"I'm sorry to hear this," said François, glancing uneasily at the

others. Like Margot, he had a premonition that life would never be the same for them again. "But I don't see how it concerns me. I can't imagine you in prison for long, any of you. They haven't the locks to withstand your long fingers and, as for me, my name has never been officially connected with the Coquillards."

"Perhaps not, François, although it is generally known that you have lived amongst us," answered Colin, contracting his black eyebrows in a scowl. "However, I'm thinking that as Regnier and I have to leave Paris in a few days and you also are forced to go away by order of the Courts, we could keep each other company."

The suggestion was reasonable but François had quickly decided that he had gone far enough with such dangerous companions. In a sense, he valued their curious friendship, but he valued his own life still more. After his first fright on hearing Colin's news, there had come a calculation in his mind which told him that this might be his chance of escaping from the toils into which he had fallen by his own weakness. Colin and Regnier might never see the town again. He had to avoid their company, but it was useless to say that he was going to visit the Abbess of Pourras again because they would want to come with him. He had to travel a long way from Paris where they were not likely to come.

As he stared at Margot in his perplexity he saw that she realised his danger, but suddenly inspiration came to him when he heard himself saying that he had thought of visiting an uncle.

"An uncle!" cried Colin. "France is full of your uncles. Where does this one live?"

François named the first town some way from Paris that came into his head and said that this uncle lived at Angers. "In a religious house there."

"Yet another monk! What an exception you are to the rest of your family! But you've never spoken of him before."

"There was no reason to do so, Colin. Angers is a long way from Paris."

"But why do you think of visiting him now?" asked Colin.

"My uncle has a rich friend and I might employ my exile of six months in spying out the land. If this friend is not too careful with his locks, if his money-bags are as numerous as they are said to be, then I could let you know and you could come to Angers with Regnier."

"Now you are talking!" cried Colin. "Angers is a long way off and you can't expect Regnier and me to come so far on what may well prove a wild-goose chase. But you can send word to me quickly through our organisation. I'll show you how that can be managed and also arrange for you to get help at Angers when

you arrive. That will pass your six months of banishment comfortably and, who knows, we may be all richer men."

François realised that he would have to go to Angers on a pretence of seeing this uncle or else Colin would get to hear of his absence, and there was no reason to fall foul of the Coquillards. He did not want them either as friends or enemies. As well Angers as another place, he thought, for all towns are alike to me, save Paris.

"And how do you propose to get so far as Angers?" Colin was saying. "Will you be walking all the way in midwinter?"

"I hadn't thought of it," answered François, "but I've no money and don't suppose I shall do much else than walk."

"Neither have we money to speak of," said Colin. "Not enough to buy a lift in a dung-cart. Margot can't help us for most of her store has been spent on this new house. We need money more desperately than ever before and I'm wondering if you can tell us of an easy crib. And, mind you, it must be ready money. We can't afford to take gold vessels to Thibaud, the jeweller, and be kept hanging about in Paris whilst he haggles over the price as usual."

François was at first tempted to say that he would have nothing to do with any more burglaries but a moment's consideration showed that Colin was right. If he had to go to Angers, then money was necessary. The country was bad enough in the summer, but to tramp it on foot in the winter with snow and ice and wolves to hamper his way was not to be thought of. The risk of putting his head in a noose had to be taken and he told Colin that the College of Navarre had always appeared easy to him.

"You may think it foolhardy to attempt such a rich and powerful college but they employ no watchman and, once inside, I know my way about the place blindfold. In the chapel is kept a box which always holds five hundred gold crowns."

"Five hundred crowns!" muttered Regnier.

"But their wall is higher than the usual," said Colin. "How shall we be climbing it?"

"The security of that wall has made them careless about watchmen," answered François. "But the house of Robert de Saint-Simon is next door. In that yard is a ladder long enough to span the college wall and it can be so arranged that our entrance would be hidden from the road. O, I can tell you this is no sudden inspiration of mine. I often pondered the idea as I sat in their lecture-rooms. All we must be careful to do is to arrange our visit when Robert de Saint-Simon and his family are away from home. How we can manage that I don't know."

"Leave it to me!" cried Colin. "They have a rich relation

living out of Paris and news that she is dying will send them off eager in search of her money. You never fail us at a pinch, François, and it only remains to decide who shall go with us. You shall make one of your rare trips. Jean is certainly necessary but Regnier will not be able to come."

"It will be a strange outing without Regnier to stand by, whispering jokes and inciting the picklocks to hold properly in the locks," said François.

"I'm sorry, François, and I shall miss the excitement," said Regnier. "But, as Colin said, I have been named in the Dijon affair and it's only a matter of time before the police come to take me up. The danger is greater each hour that I stay in Paris, and so it has been arranged that I leave the town to-day and wait for Colin to join me."

"And I shall bring your share of the spoils, never fear," said Colin. "But four of us will be necessary and who's to take your place I don't know."

"Why not take Dom Nicolas?" said Regnier. "Unfrocked priest that he is, he takes a particular delight in robbing churchmen and, for a man of his bulk, he's agile enough."

"Dom Nicolas it shall be," said Colin, "and I dare say he'll be all right so long as we keep him away from the drink. Somebody will be needed to look after our cloaks and keep watch in the house outside."

"Guy Tabary is the man for that," said François, "and there's no need to tell him how much we find in the chest. Ten crowns will satisfy him."

"A week will give me time to make arrangements with the others," said Colin, "and so we'd better say Christmas Eve. That day has several advantages, one being that the bells make such a clatter that our own noises will be drowned. We can't meet here and had better not risk giving Margot's new house a bad name. We'll have dinner at the Mule and proceed to the rue Mont-Sainte-Geneviève from there."

"That's settled then," said François. "I've no doubt my uncle will give me some money and that can be used to pay for our dinner."

"Or else we'll have it chalked on the door," said Colin.

"We don't want to leave reminders behind us," said François.

"You're improving, François," said Colin, "and take more interest than usual in this expedition. Is it because your own college is concerned that the idea appeals to you?"

"I do feel that I shall be getting my own back for the boredom I endured," answered François, "but all that money would certainly be useful."

"Then all that remains to be said is good-bye, François. Regnier has to be on the move and Margot must make her preparations for to-morrow."

"Good-bye is a sad word, especially when it is spoken in the house we shan't see again," muttered François.

They stood awkward, staring at each other in dejection, until Colin, with an oath, said they would all meet again in six months or before and dragged Regnier away. But he pulled free and came back to François, saying that he was sorry to leave him. François realised that, although they had lived so close together, he did not know the man and had not realised his affection. He had always been satisfied to take Regnier as he found him and had made no effort to pierce his shield of sarcasm. That failure was in keeping with those other of his lost opportunities and, when it was too late, he realised how heedlessly his life had so far been lived. Regnier was the sort of man whose proper place was on his country estate with dogs at heel. That imagination of him would always persist, an elegant figure of a man, and it was a strange destiny that led such a one from falconry and hunting to card-sharpping and constant dodging of the police. What maggot had eaten into both their brains, what malignant fairy had stood at both their births?

But François then heard Regnier asking if he would explain matters to his younger sister, Jeanne. "She is the only one who cares for me," Regnier said. "It would worry her if she thought I was in the danger I am now in."

"You can leave that to me," muttered François. And Regnier, saying that they'd see each other before long, ran after Colin.

Margot and François stood at the window watching their two friends out of sight. Colin talked confidently as usual but Regnier took little notice, and François believed he was silently bidding farewell to the town they all loved: a thought he was careful to keep from Margot. And, as they turned from the window, François decided to get away as quickly as possible. A woman in tears was always an embarrassment. But Margot mastered her emotion and called for wine in her usual manner.

"I don't like the idea of this robbery at Navarre," she said, "but you've got to have money and it's not likely you'll be caught after escaping so often."

"We'll be safe," answered François. "As you know, I've usually avoided taking part in these affairs but this time everything will go well, believe me."

And, to bridge the awkward gap in conversation he saw coming, he talked cheerfully of the good times they would have together when his six months' exile was over.

"I intend to break completely with the dangerous friends we have made and now that they have been driven from the town, or are elsewhere in hiding, you too will be able to say good-bye to them. I believe the police intend to put a finish to their activities once and for all and they will be too busy to bother their heads about us. We can devote our energies to the revival of your custom."

"Will you be coming to live with me again?" said Margot.

"I'm not sure that I shall have the heart to leave the old man again but at least I shall have all day to help you. I'm only too conscious of my responsibility in causing you to lose your prosperity."

"Never mind responsibility!" cried Margot. "I'd have you come because you love me. There's no reason why you shouldn't come back safe and sound from your exile. I realised that you have no uncle at Angers and gave that as an excuse to avoid risking your skin in Colin's company but I can't rid myself of depression. For three nights past, I dreamed of prisons and torture-chambers and pits dug in the ground. In all of them have been our friends, and the last time I dreamed the wind twisted the man on the gibbet and it was into your dear face I looked, François. Your face was worn and haggard and shrivelled, washed by the rain, bleached by the sun: and I was glad to awake screaming and find it only a dream."

A chill of fear came over François as he listened to her description and he said that they could accept the dream as a warning. And he set himself out to make Margot laugh, saying that, like as not, they would settle down peacefully and get married when his uncle died.

"The old man can't last for ever, you know, and then we shall be free to do as we please. You'll yet see us walking over the bridges to church each Sunday, with three or four of our children behind and the neighbours glancing enviously out of window, the men grudging François Villon his wealth and stately deportment, the women casting covetous eyes on his wife's gown."

"A pleasant dream!" cried Margot. "Every woman holds in her heart an ache for a respectable home and children. But in the wildest of my dreams I could never imagine you in that state."

"I'm good for no respectable trade," said François, "and to live together on the sale of drink is all we ask from life."

"An innkeeper and his wife!" said Margot. "Yes, you'd fit that part and our tavern would be the merriest in Paris. The word need only go round that François Villon had set up with Margot and the crowds would flock in again. You have made yourself the most popular man about the taverns with your jokes and your

poetry. When all's said and done, six months is no time at all to wait for happiness, and I should be a poor sort of woman if I grudged the waiting. I was a fool not to realise that Colin's flight from Paris is a God-given chance to escape his dangerous company."

When François left, Margot had a brave smile on her face. But he had somehow lost his confidence and stood staring hopelessly into her blue eyes and stroking the coils of her yellow hair, an old lover's habit of his, as if he could not bear to tear himself away. And on his way to Saint-Benoît an inexplicable sense of disaster hung over him. He could not explain his discomfort, maybe it was caused by Margot's dream or else the break-up of a companionship he valued more than he had imagined, but it was difficult to shake off.

But soon he remembered Margot had said that François Villon was the most popular man about the taverns and had suggested that therein lay his way of earning a living when he came back from exile. She was right, but he knew that such a name was easily forgotten and six months a long time to be away. He might come back to find himself forgotten and his popularity filched by some other jester. Many of these, like himself, were clerks denied their letters of nomination. Was there a way in which he was different? François saw himself in the tavern again, and the cries of delight and the shouts of applause were greatest when he read some of his own poetry. The noise of the cheering thundered in his ears, wine was again thrust under his nose, and laughing, drunken girls flung their arms round his neck. A poem must certainly be left behind to speak for him when Paris was miles away. He had to make his friends laugh once more and as the verses passed from hand to hand, from tavern to tavern, so would the memory of François Villon. The six months would be gone before they had finished laughing and, returned at the right moment, he would find a comfortable livelihood awaiting him and the chance to revive the custom of Margot's new house.

He had a full week before the court order came into force and, with a short good night to Guillaume, he locked himself in his room upstairs and eagerly took up his pen. But the subject of his poem was difficult to find and, after much thought, he wrote down something in the hope that the act of writing would prove suggestive. And slowly he labelled his unborn poem with the date and the name of its author and the sentiment that, as Virgil says, a man must look to his own works or else he will find himself in a poor state.

Despite his efforts, the verse ended in nothing, failing to disguise

the fact that he had as yet nothing to say, and, biting hard on his pen, François suddenly thought of Catherine de Vausselles. There was a subject that had never failed him. All over Paris, he was known as the despised and rejected lover. He had made a mock of himself and now he could get a laugh by use of it again. And casting around for a metaphor, thinking of Catherine's hard face, François glanced out of his window and thought that was certainly the season to be writing of hardness. It was near Christmas, with snow piling against the doors, wolves driven mad with hunger from the woods and howling outside the walls of the town, whilst every family in Paris shivered round the blazing fires, sipping hot wine, roasting chestnuts, and telling ghost stories. From these thoughts came his next verse, slipping easily from his pen.

Warming to his work, he wrote the next five verses easily and quickly, complaining of the treatment he had received from Catherine and giving unrequited love as his only reason for leaving Paris. And as he penned this seventh verse there came unbidden the jingle of some lines he had heard were written by Eustace Deschamps. If his memory was correct, Deschamps left to the Grey Friars his old drawers and shirt, whilst to the King he left the Louvre, the Palais, and the Tour du Bois. François too was at a stage in life when the future was uncertain and a man might make his will. He had nothing to give away but, like Eustace Deschamps, he could bequeath useless things or those that were not his to give.

Here was the subject for which he had been searching. Paris could be made to laugh for months at the mock will he would write and, well satisfied, he went to bed to sleep on it, for, once an idea had come, the working out would be easy.

Most of the week remaining to him was passed in the writing. Guillaume was forgotten and he took pleasure in the task, laughing cheerfully at his own jokes as he imagined his friends laughing. After a verse in which his broken heart was bequeathed to Catherine the next twenty-four verses were devoted entirely to mock bequests. He was careful to present his gifts to rich or powerful men, for he knew that the poor always like to laugh at the rich. A typical example of this was the present of his drawers, which were being held as security for drinks he had had at the Trumelières tavern. These were given to Robert Vallée, a rich financier, to make a better headdress for his mistress, called Jehanne de Millières, and his mailshirt was also to be sold so that Vallée could buy himself a scrivener's stall. And these bequests were mingled haphazard with memories of his past life and the men he knew: so that, remembering his last fancy of Regnier de Montigny, he left him three dogs, and to Jehan le Loup and Casin Cholet a duck, picked

up by the walls near dusk, and to hide the duck they could have a long gown reaching down to the ankles, like those worn by the Franciscans. François gave to those men taken up and put in the Châtelet prison, his mirror and the good graces of the gaoler's wife; to the hospitals, his window-curtains spun from spider-webs; to the vagabonds sleeping under stalls at night, a punch in the eye; to his barber, the clippings of his hair; to the mendicant friars, the capons and plump fowls they were supposed to relish, and to Guillaume Cotin and Thibaud de Vitry, two old and rich canons of Notre-Dame, he left those letters of nomination to a benefice which he had never received.

His facetiousness spent itself at last and no longer seemed funny, and the bell of the Sorbonne tolling nine, François began to think of ending his poem. The night was cold and he drew his tattered gown around his body and blew on his hands, thinking that the best place for him was bed. His ink was freezing and, with a glance at his own shadow cast grotesque on the wall by the candle which he saw would soon be out, he quickly scribbled the last two verses, describing himself as the famous Villon.

The famous or infamous Villon, he thought. I think I can claim that title, but when I come back to Paris, I'll gladly sacrifice my name for a mess of pottage. I'll pay my bribe to the police with the next man if only they'll leave me in peace to live comfortably with Margot.

And stuffing his poem under his pillow he was glad to blow out the candle and roll himself into the bedclothes, thinking that he must not forget to give it to Guy Tabary so that the necessary copies could be made.

CHAPTER XII

NEXT day was Christmas Eve, the last day François could be in Paris and the day of his appointment with Colin to visit the College of Navarre. The farewells to Marthe and those of the monks he chose to see were easy because they all believed his absence was to last only six months, but François could not rid himself of the feeling that his exile would be long. Ever since Margot had spoken of her presentiment of evil to come, he had found himself bidding farewell to the very stones of the streets he knew and loved so well. Every familiar thing he saw made him ask if he would ever

see it again. Every movement, every thought, was coloured by his memories of the past. He was like an old man who had been told that death was just round the corner.

But, on that Christmas Eve, action was necessary and, putting the past behind him, he had so far recovered his normal outlook that when he attended early Mass with his uncle he was able to pay proper attention to the women in the church. He smiled to see them seated so demurely on a fold of their gowns, whispering to each other under their hoods, looking as if butter would not melt in their mouths. Margot's house had been a favourite meeting-place for illicit lovers and he could have told tales of many in the church that morning their husbands and fathers would have been much annoyed to hear.

After Mass, he set out with his uncle down the rue Saint-Jacques towards the Gate of Saint-Jacques. They were silent, each busy with his own thoughts. The silence was not broken until the University buildings and the great church of the Jacobins had been passed and they were through the Gate of Saint-Jacques itself and outside the walls of the town. Then Guillaume asked François if he had said good-bye to his mother.

"I went to the Celestins first thing this morning," said François. "Her perception of this world is dim but she is happy in her devotions. She found it difficult to follow the petty turnings and twistings of my life: her mind is filled with the paintings of Heaven and Hell to be seen in the great chapel of the Celestins. Hell, showing sinners with the skin blistered off their backs, filled her with fear, but Heaven, with its saints and its angels, its lutes and its harps, gave her blissful happiness. Her only worry is how a poor old woman, old and lean and unlettered, can aspire to such bliss. She remembered that I am something of a poet and asked me to write a poem on her behalf to the Virgin Mary, asking for mercy on her sinful life!"

"A request I hope you will one day fulfil, François?"

"One day, perhaps," answered François. "But, for the time being, I simply refrained from worrying her. I did not mention my banishment from Paris for six months but just said I was visiting the monastery again."

"That was a happy thought, François, and I hope the brothers treat you as well as they did before. Have you all you want?"

"The money you gave me, uncle, is safely in my purse and Marthe has packed me up some food."

"I'm sorry I could not give you more money," said Guillaume. "But the brothers will make no charge."

They had long since passed beyond the few houses and churches

that clustered round the walls of the town. The open country was in sight and the time had come for Guillaume to say good-bye and make his way back to the town. But he kept delaying the parting with first one excuse, then another: saying that the sun was doing him good, or that he must see the little Church of Notre-Dame-des-Champs, until François declared that he would not budge another step unless Guillaume started on his way back.

"We have walked a long way and you'll be overtaking your strength so that you'll be carried back to Saint-Benoît in a state of exhaustion. And what should I say if I come back in six months to find you on a sick-bed, with Marthe and your friends shaking their heads at me, saying that the start of the trouble was the day I walked you too far into the country?"

"I know I must turn back, François, and it is foolish to keep on postponing the inevitable. We'll make that stone cross down the road the limit of my journey."

And, suddenly deciding to give a hint of his plan for their future, he told François that he was not without hope. "You must not ask what I intend to do, for I believe you would be unwise enough to reject it now," he said. "But my proposal will give us the chance to regain happiness. Many of the truly best men have been wild in their youth and the man who is virtuous in his youth will often run to women and debauchery later in life, whilst his brother, who has always been a scapegoat in his young days, will remember God as he grows older."

François looked into his uncle's serene, thoughtful old face and wondered how it was that a man could have such faith in another. The canon was no fool, and surely if he looked at the matter dispassionately he would see that he was chasing after a shadow. But François could see that he would never be capable of a dispassionate attitude: he would go on believing in his nephew or believing in God, which of the two it was could not be exactly told, right to the end. Nothing would shake this obsession, which had perhaps usurped the place that God alone had formerly held in his thoughts.

And arrived at the stone cross, Guillaume said that good-bye must be spoken. "A dreary word for an old man," he muttered. "Even more difficult than I had imagined. But we must remember that it is only for six months. They will soon pass and afterwards a brighter future will be before us."

And hastily giving his blessing, tears in his eyes, Guillaume turned and started on his lonely way back to Paris.

François stood on the steps of the cross and watched the canon trudging away, leaning heavily on his stick, and as he waved his

hand in farewell, pity for the old man came over him again. A shame that such a man should waste his love, he cried.

And seated on the top step of the cross, with the sad face of the Christ staring out over his shoulder, François wondered if it was any use vowing to behave better in future. The plan his uncle had in mind was easy to guess. His first inclination had been to declare that he could not live out of Paris, neither in Burgundy or anywhere else, but he was glad that the impulse had been suppressed. Better to leave the old man contented and hopeful for a while longer. But the salvation plan was doomed to failure, and if Guillaume persisted, then he would be driven the more quickly to live with Margot.

The priest was by that time far down the white road, a black dot on the snow. François shivered, suppressing a sudden feeling of loneliness, and decided that he had best find the nearest tavern and keep himself warm until the late afternoon, when it would be time to slip quietly back into Paris.

But the company in the beer-house François found was not to his liking. There were no women to lighten the conversation of a few farm-hands, who continually grumbled about the hard winter and the number of wolves in the forests, allowing no man to keep a duck or a hen in peace, though his fences be five feet high and strong as the city walls. If the wolves were kept at bay, then Reynard would somehow find a way through and leave only a few scattered feathers to mark his entrance. Such talk soon drove François from the place, hoping that he and his friends had plundered ducks from these fellows in the past as a sort of fine for the monotony of their talk. He decided to go back to Paris at once.

François made a long detour as far as the community of the Cordeliers, and then approached the town by way of the rue des Cordeliers and the rue Saint-Marceau to the Gate of Bordelles. It was important that Guillaume or his friends should not meet him, and from this gate the rue de Bordelles led straight to the College of Navarre. Near by was Colin's house and a stone at the window soon brought out his lean, formidable figure.

François was already feeling lonely and he was childishly pleased to see his friend. "By Christ, I'm pleased to see you," he cried, holding out his hands.

"By God's elbow, no more happy than I am, François, lad!" cried Colin, gripping his hands.

The unnecessarily fervent response embarrassed Colin as soon as the words were out of his mouth. He looked sheepish, drew his hands back, and hurriedly said they were acting as if they had not met for years instead of a week before.

"Have you told Guy Tabary to arrange for our dinner at the Mule?" Colin asked, assuming his usual business-like manner.

"My uncle didn't give me the money until this morning and I can't go searching the town for Tabary now."

"Then it is lucky I told him to meet me here," said Colin. "I don't mean to run any risks this last time and am taking him to a house where I can keep my eye on him. Ah, there he is, dreaming as usual."

And catching hold of Tabary's sleeve, as he passed by without seeing them, Colin drew him into the doorway in which they stood.

"Take these two crowns François will give you," Colin said, "and buy what is necessary for dinner at the Mule this evening, arranging for a private room."

"That's an order easily understood," cried Tabary, with a knowing wink. "Something in the wind, eh?"

"You'll hear soon enough about that," answered Colin. "But come prepared to stay out the night. There will be five of us for dinner: we three, Dom Nicolas and Little Jean. And when you've made these arrangements come to the house I pointed out."

Tabary was surprised and flattered at the gold entrusted to his care. Misgiving was suggested by his simplicity, and as François walked away with Colin he asked if Tabary was altogether a safe person to trust.

"We've trusted him often enough before," said Colin, "and he has never given us away. He knows it's more than his life is worth."

"I don't mean that he would give us away intentionally," said François. "But lately he has become so proud of his association with us and so boastful in his cups that something might leak out."

"Guy is safe enough," said Colin. "He can even be stubborn when he likes. But let's not worry our heads needlessly. Everything is safely arranged. Little Jean and Dom Nicolas have been warned and Little Jean has promised that he will see that the priest doesn't get too much wine into his skin. A message was sent to entice Robert de Saint-Simon and his family well out of town, but there's still an hour or two before dark when it will be safe for you to come to the Mule. I'm taking you to a house near the walls where we can have a drink and a sleep. We'll be needing both before the night's out."

François was glad of the chance to sleep in peace, forgetting the dreary trudge away from Paris which had soon to be endured, but Colin was pulling at his sleeve early in the evening. With yawns, and stifled curses, they pulled themselves together and left the

house, telling Guy Tabary to lag behind and make sure they were not followed.

"A pity we have to do this sort of thing," said Colin. "I would we had been born rich with nothing to do all day but eat and enjoy ourselves. We both have expensive tastes and, so that we may satisfy them, we are forced to risk our necks and fiddle with locks and creep about in the cold and damp of the early morning. O, the life is all right when you're young. I used to enjoy the thrill, but now I am getting older I resent the necessity, and wonder why it is that I should have to do such things when another is born with the money I steal."

"It's a curiously contrived world," answered François. "But there's not much chance of improvement."

"I know that well enough," said Colin. "But I sometimes wish that the old bloated fool who will one day order me to be strung up by the neck could be made to leave his estates and his falconry and his hunting and go hungry for a month. Then we'd see whether his hand wandered to the loaf in the window or the tripe on the stall. I knew what it was to be hungry when I was a boy."

"You're right there, Colin. One man is as good as another and as capable of crime, it's only the degree of temptation that varies. What is overwhelming temptation for one man does not even prick at another man's consciousness. Yet there must be circumstances in which that man would fall as easily as his brother. But the discussion is likely to lead us into mazes of argument from which we shall never escape. They will rankle in mind and to-night, in the College of Navarre, Little Jean will be amazed to see you put down your picklock and begin to argue that had Robert d'Estouteville been born in your circumstances, then he too would have been picking that lock."

"His amazed face would be a fine sight," cried Colin. "The little man never thinks of the why or the wherefore. He just does what is necessary to be done."

"I always thought you were the same, Colin."

"I have a little imagination, even if I am no poet," said Colin. "But we must not let imagination run away with us, the work we have in hand to-night forbids it. We must concentrate our thoughts on the College of Navarre and the gold in its coffers. Here is the Mule. Muffle your cloak around your face as we pass through the tavern."

Little Jean and Dom Nicolas were waiting in the room to which they were shown. Dom Nicolas hailed Colin boisterously.

"Keep your great mouth shut!" said Colin, glaring at him. "This is a serious occasion and no time for festivity. We've no

wish to draw attention to this room. I hope you haven't got too much wine in your skin or else you'll be chasing blue devils behind the doors of the College to-night and become something of an embarrassment to us. I shouldn't wish to have to stick my dagger in your gut. The flood of wine would be dangerous to the whole quarter."

"Not too much, Colin!" roared the monk. "Just enough to make me fit enough to take on the whole watch, if necessary!"

"It won't be necessary if you follow my instructions, all of you," said Colin. And he explained the plan he proposed, first going to the door to make sure that no servant had his ear to the keyhole.

As François listened to Colin, who excelled in these terse descriptions of the part each man was to play, he watched the attitude of the other three and gained comfort from two of them. Guy Tabary looked mildly pleased with himself, having obviously formed the opinion that no harm could come to him in such company. But the unfrocked priest, Dom Nicolas, a native of Picardy, was a strong bull of a fellow, with a thick neck, florid complexion, and a temper as fiery as his appearance. He had a stout cudgel in his hand, deeming it a sin that a monk should shed blood, and there was no doubt of his usefulness if it came to a fight. Yet the greater comfort was Little Jean, that stocky, restless man, his mind and his body continually on the fidget. He tested each part of Colin's plan as it was unfolded, slowly suggesting possible alternatives. Here was somebody who did not mean to get caught through carelessness, and if they did find themselves in the Conciergerie, with a dance at the rope's end in front of them, then Little Jean would not be to blame. But at last he was satisfied and declared that he could see no loophole.

"There should be no mistake," he said, spitting copiously into the great hearth. "But there's one thing more, François. How many locks do you reckon are on this chest?"

"It's difficult to answer exactly," answered François. "But so far as I remember, the outer chest has four locks and the inner chest three."

"Seven locks you are saying?" cried Little Jean. "Is there any chance of bursting the chest open?"

"No chance. Not the least in the world!" said François. "Both chests, inner and outer, are strong and heavy, with iron bands as extra security."

"Holy Mother, seven locks and ironbound chests!" muttered Little Jean, rubbing the palms of his hands excitedly up and down his calf muscles. "This is going to be one of the hardest jobs we've tackled. Laurens le Brasseur, here in the rue Saint-Jacques,

has the contract for this college and his locks are the worst I've ever handled. There's not a lock I can't open when my mind's made up to it but this chest will take four hours at the very least."

"We can get there easily by ten," said Colin.

"Then I shall have plenty of time, Colin, and so long as we're left alone to work in peace we'll get our hands on those crowns by early morning."

"François is sure that no watchman is kept by the Faculty," answered Colin, "and Guy Tabary will keep vigil in the house to tell us when the watch is in the neighbourhood. Nothing will go wrong if Guy Tabary keeps his head."

"You can trust me for that!" cried Guy Tabary, his round face beaming with pride and joy. "After that affair at the Augustinians the other day, I'm only too anxious to feel more of the clerical gold jingling in my purse."

"Not so loud!" shouted Colin. "You're too fond of naming our little exploits and one day you'll be finding trouble if your tongue doesn't keep still. We are leaving Paris but Little Jean and other of our friends will be left behind. If any word of this passes your lips, one or other of them will slit your throat and chuck the carcass in the Seine."

Tabary's answering protestation was ignored and, at a sign from Colin, all four of them gathered round the affrighted man and made him take a solemn vow that he would never reveal what he knew, whether sober or drunk.

Satisfied that Tabary had been impressed, and with a triumphant glance at François as if advising him to note that a good general never forgot the smallest detail, Colin said it was time to be off. And so, drawing their cloaks round their ears, they left the Mule, François casting a quick glance at the dim outline of Saint-Benoît as he wondered if his uncle was in bed or in front of the fire with his wine, thinking of the nephew he imagined to be out of Paris.

"We'll go a roundabout way, in case we do happen to have been seen," whispered Colin. And, slinking along in the shadow of the houses, they approached the College of Navarre by way of the rue des Noyers, the rue Saint-Victor, and the rue des Anglais, which brought them out opposite the house of Robert de Saint-Simon, which, according to their plan, should be empty.

"Are you sure he took note of your message and left Paris?" whispered François.

"To make certain, I'll knock at the door," said Colin.

François could feel his own heart thumping as they awaited an answer to Colin's knock at the door. Dom Nicolas too was breathing heavily and Guy Tabary kept glancing fearfully over his

shoulder, ready to bolt at the least sound. But no light showed in answer to their knocking. Colin then whispered to Little Jean, and in a twinkling the little man was on Colin's shoulder and over the wall of the garden.

"That's why I'm nicknamed the 'Ladder' in some quarters!" whispered Colin. "He'll open the gate for us."

As he spoke, the gate swung noiselessly open and they all slipped inside the garden, François at least relieved to feel that the shelter of a wall was behind them.

On the other side of the garden there showed the high wall of the college, but the ladder François had remembered was soon found and placed in the shadow of the angle made by the college wall and the garden wall.

"It just reaches the top of the wall," said Colin, as they heaved it up. "And now, Guy, all you have to do is to keep watch on the street and, if you see the watchman hesitate, give the cry of the wolf, which I have heard you imitate to perfection. Repeat this three times and wait. We shan't be long getting back to you but, by God's elbow, you'd best do nothing foolish! Is that all clear?"

"To watch the street and the cry of the wolf three times repeated in the event of danger," answered Guy.

"That's right, Guy, and if you'll take our cloaks we'll get to work. You lead the way, François, as you know how to get down the other side. Little Jean follows you, then Dom Nicolas can lumber along and I will come last. So, for the time being, we're in your hands and let's hope your memory doesn't fail."

François stood at the foot of the ladder, hands grasping the cold, smooth wood, and stared desperately up at the dark line of the wall above his head, trembling with fear and excitement. But escape was impossible. Slowly he made the awkward ascent until he was sitting astride the cold wall, peering down at his companions below, clustered round the foot of the ladder, faces upturned. All was quiet and François beckoned to Little Jean. Nimble as a cat, he was sitting beside him in an instant, but they had to wait long enough for Dom Nicolas and the climb was only achieved after many grunts from the sweating monk, with Colin's shoulder assisting him from behind.

"If the ladder should break, we are done for, Christ, we are done for!" muttered Little Jean, cracking his finger joints. "We'd never get him away. He'd have to stay like a boar that has come on his death-wound."

But the strong wood stood the strain and all four sat safely together on the wall.

"Is that the shed you spoke of, François?" asked Colin.

"That's it, Colin. I'll show you the way down," said François. He dropped on to the roof, directly beneath them, and slid down it to the ground. Then he led them to a window in the college, saying that it used to open easily. The window swung noiselessly open, at a sharp wrench with Colin's picklock, and the four men scrambled through to the stone floor.

"It's dark as a vault in here," said Colin.

"This is the sacristy and leads into the chapel, where the usual lamp hangs before the altar," said François. "If you wait here, I will take our lantern and get a light from the altar, so that you may follow without stumbling over a bench."

"Be sure to keep the shade over the lantern as you come back," said Colin. "And hurry."

François took the lantern with assurances that he would be careful and felt his way along the walls of the sacristy into the chapel. There was the light before the altar, burning steadily as ever, and, blessing its convenience, he lit his own lantern and slipped back, startled by the shadows the light brought to life.

The others, guided by the lantern, followed him back to the chapel and, leading them to a corner away from the windows, François showed the chest they were after.

"A tough customer but we'll manage," said Colin. "You've done well, François, and must now leave the rest to Little Jean and me, whilst you and Dom Nicolas keep watch at the entrances to this chapel. All we need fear is that the Faculty have appointed a watchman since you were here, François. Keep a sharp look-out. It's on the small matters like that that people always go wrong. If you see the watchman's lantern approaching, slip behind a pillar and let him have your dagger quietly in the side, with no thought for him or his family. It's his life against our five. Put the lantern on the floor by the chest, get to your separate posts and wait in patience. To-morrow we'll have a dinner together in celebration of the gold which will be jingling in our purses by the early morning."

From his place near the chapel door, François could see Colin and Little Jean bending over the chest. Little Jean had taken out his picklocks with quiet deliberation and tried them one by one in the locks, whilst Colin anxiously watched and held the light where it was wanted. For once, the leader was being led, and François did not doubt that the two would succeed.

But the long wait with nothing to do soon became irksome. The echoing, bare walls of the chapel amplified every sound that was made and the dim light of the lantern cast their gesticulating shadows on the walls. Morbid fancies entered his head and he

looked fearfully into every corner of the chapel, wondering if Guy Tabary was still awake. If he slept and the watch came in force, even his uncle could not save him. Only Guy Tabary might save his neck and the rest of them would soon be swinging and twisting from the rope's end. There would be no more women, no more good wine or food, and never again would Margot strip her white flesh naked before him. His own flesh would be rotting in the sun and the winds.

This sudden vision was shocking but it was too late for retreat. Whatever was coming would come, and François even found a sort of comfort in this fatalism as he sat down on a bench, realising that he was tired and listless and spent.

His doze was broken by a sudden, deafening clamour, and jumping to his feet, hand on dagger, he listened to the booming waves of sound until he realised that the bells tolled overhead in celebration of the coming Christmas. That meant they had been in the chapel over an hour, for the bells would not start until eleven. But the outer shell had not yet been forced, two locks on it still remained intact, and the sweat was pouring off Little Jean. He looked up at François, wiping sweat from his eyes.

"The worst job we've done!" he muttered hoarsely. "But we'll best it yet."

It was more than three hours afterwards that a grunt of excitement marked the end of the struggle. When François and Dom Nicolas hurried across, Little Jean had the last lock undone and Colin had prised up the inner covering to show the bags of gold nestling underneath.

"By Saint Denis, we've earned that money!" cried Little Jean. "How much do you make it, Colin?"

"Fifty crowns in each bag and ten loose! Ah, the pretty sight it is!" said Colin, his eyes sparkling. "Five hundred and ten crowns, which is a proper number. Ten crowns will do for Guy Tabary and one hundred crowns each for the rest of us, including Regnier. Tabary can think that we were unlucky and only had one hundred crowns all told. And now that our luck is in, I think we should search for more of the theological gold."

"Don't tempt fate in your greediness," said François. "We ought to go whilst things are quiet."

"Maybe you're right, François, although it's a pity to leave money behind. This aumbry here can be tried."

But the aumbry looked difficult and, after vainly trying a few doors leading out of the chapel, Colin agreed with François and decided they had done enough for one night.

"Look around the floor to make sure that no splinters are left

behind," said Colin. "Then, if we cover the chest with this cloth, the loss may go undetected for many months."

"Everything is cleared up," said Little Jean, carefully wrapping his picklock in a piece of oiled silk. "I don't make any litter."

And on that assurance they were glad to go back the way they had come, not forgetting to close the window behind them and replace the ladder where they had found it.

"You've been gone almost four hours!" said Guy Tabary. "I thought you were never coming back. All that time, I've been suffering the torments of hell, imagining myself twisting on the rack or my belly filling with gallons of ice-cold water. Believe me, it's better to be up and doing in an affair of this sort than expecting the watch to come round the corner!"

"Too much wine in your belly!" answered Colin. "Here we are safe and sound with the gold, as you should have known. One hundred crowns we got and there's ten crowns for your share."

"Ten crowns will come in very useful," said Tabary, beaming.

"That's the spirit!" cried Colin, grinning at the others. "Here's your ten crowns, Guy, with an extra couple for luck, and if you'll have a look down the street to make sure the coast is clear I'll divide the rest of the money."

And when Tabary had gone, Colin set aside one hundred crowns for Regnier and gave a hundred each to François and Dom Nicolas and that clever workman, Little Jean, saying that they could make better use of it than a simpleton like Guy Tabary.

"The street's deserted," announced Guy Tabary, coming back.

"Then hand us our cloaks and we'll be on our way, giving thanks to Robert de Saint-Simon for the shelter his house has given us and the excellent strategic base it made for our operations to-night. I'm almost inclined to leave a few crowns on the table and so atone for the disappointment Robert will have had when he hurried into the country ready to speak a funeral oration over his rich relative, only to discover that she was alive and kicking and much surprised to see him!"

"Your money will go soon enough without that!" said François.

The street was reached without incident and, once away from the college, they decided it best to separate in case five men together so early in the morning aroused the suspicions of the watch. They stood together in the doorway of a deserted house in the rue des Anglais and Colin gave Guy Tabary a couple of crowns to arrange for dinner next day at Margot's new house.

"Let her know that it's to be one of her best and serve as a baptism," he said. "We can trust Margot to look after our wants when she knows there'll be five of us to celebrate."

"You've forgotten that I'm forbidden to put my nose inside Paris for the next six months," said François, licking his dried lips as the memory came fully back to him.

"By God's liver, I had forgotten!" cried Colin. "We shall miss you, curse all interfering women, and I'll revenge this loss on your Catherine de Vausselles, if ever I get half a chance. I myself shall risk another day in Paris but it would not be safe for you to do so and I suppose you'll be leaving us now?"

"At once, Colin, for I want to be well out of town by dawn."

"Then I'd advise you to avoid the gates and slip out by that opening in the walls we've used so often on our duck-stealing expeditions. For all we know, they may discover the empty chest to-day and you don't want to be questioned at the gate and then have it remembered that François Villon left Paris in the early hours of the same day."

"I'll remember the advice, Colin, and now I'll go."

"It's a poor way to be leaving Paris, in the early hours, with nobody to drink your health and bear you company a part of the way," cried Colin, who did not seem to relish the idea of letting François go. "But you have that in your purse for comfort. And I'll be saying you no good-byes, for we shall be meeting again in a short six months or before. You are our envoy to Angers and I hope you'll bring us good news, so that Regnier and I can set out to join you."

"I'll do my best, never fear," answered François.

The two gripped hands again, as they had done the day before, and François looked miserably into the eyes of this man many would say had been his evil genius. But the future appeared dark to him and he felt that he was bidding farewell to the only strong, powerful friend he had. The dark, saturnine features of the man had come to mean more than François knew, and it was with a deep regret that he took what he instinctively felt was his last sight of the gaunt face, with its ludicrous contrasting of light blue eyes set in the swarthy undergrowth of black eyebrows and a black beard that Colin was beginning to grow as a disguise. The man's length leaned protectively over François and he caught a last flicker of those curious eyes, with almost a tender look in them. His habit of relying on Colin's sagacity and strength had become so strong that François was almost crying out that he would not leave him. But he restrained his fear and his regrets.

Good-byes were whispered and François told them to hurry on whilst he would wait in the shadows to make sure they were not followed. But they had not gone far before he remembered the

poem he had written and, running after them, he called Guy Tabary back and briefly explained the poem and its purpose.

"Leave it to me," Tabary said. "I'll see to it that your poem becomes as well known as the 'Romance of the Rose,' and in six months Paris will still be anxious to remember its writer."

"I knew I could rely on you, Guy," said François. "Take these crowns for your trouble."

"No, I'll not take them. You'll be needing them more than I shall," muttered Guy Tabary. And turning away whilst his resolution was strong, the little man rejoined his companions and, with a last flickering wave of the hand, the four friends disappeared down a side street, leaving François to stare miserably after them, with that cold feeling of desolation come over him once more.

But his sense of loss was even greater than when he had watched his uncle out of sight the day before. Now he was indeed left to his own devices, with never a friend to help. And, frightened by the crafty silence of the sleeping town and the crime he had just committed, François took to his heels and ran swiftly over the snow-covered streets to that opening in the walls Colin had mentioned, not daring to pause for breath until he was outside the town and safely on the road.

His breath was caught in great gulping sobs and, turning his face the way he had come, François stared at the shadowy outline of Paris in the morning dusk. As he stood at gaze, there stirred in his imagination the cloister, the lecture-room, and the tavern: the three parts of his existence. Once again, he took leave of Guillaume, and Margot was thought of with regret, her body held in a last passionate embrace. The men and women he had known passed before his eyes in countless numbers and the events of his life in fantastic, disordered array, but suddenly all were resolved into the sprawling figure of Sermoise as he stretched on the ground, the knife quivering in his side.

With a curse, François brushed his hand across his eyes and shook the tapestry of his life away, saying that it was behind him, best forgotten. And, turning his back on the town, he thought of the dreary journey before him.

Once away from the shelter of the houses, he had discovered a cold wind roaring across the fields, tossing the branches of trees high above his head. The darkness too was deeper, owls hooted mournfully, and sudden scurries of snow were whipped by the wind into his face. His way would be hard for, in this sort of weather, he was to travel needlessly to Angers on a fool's errand, with no more purpose than to pass the time and throw dust in the eyes of the Coquillards. Six months exiled from Paris would be

an eternity. The only comfort he could find was in the weight of the hundred gold crowns in his belt. That was his shield and the money must be used carefully. Some of it must be sewn in the lining of his clothes as soon as possible, and the thought reminded him at once that at least he had enough money to make women happy to do this or any other service for him.

PART II

CHAPTER I

FRANÇOIS had been some time in Angers before he sought out the man Colin had mentioned. He found Angers an easy town to live in when a man had money in his purse. But in May, 1457, he decided the introduction could no longer be put off and he made himself known to the man at the house where he had been directed by Colin. This man was white-faced and thin, sparing of his words, who silently listened to the tale François told him, not looking in his eyes for one moment.

"Colin de Cayeux sent word that you would be here by February or March," was his only comment when François finished.

"The winter has been a hard one and the snows made travelling difficult," said François, wondering if trouble was coming.

"That's true, God knows!" said the Coquillard. "And what you do is no business of mine. I've simply been told to see that you get any help you may need. But, first of all, I'll take you to the inn where it will be safest for you to stay."

He led the way silently through the streets and, to make conversation, François spoke of the many churches in the town, that seemed to outnumber the tiny, slate-roofed houses.

"Your errand has something to do with a monk?" the man said.

And François regretted his mention of the churches in Angers for his companion might ask the name of his supposed uncle. But the Coquillard showed no interest and soon their destination was reached: a small inn near the Gate of Saint-Michel. Drinks were ordered and, sitting in an out-of-the-way corner, François was pleased to hear the man say that the inn was not the headquarters of the Coquillards in Angers.

"But you're safe here until you can make arrangements with your uncle," he said, "and then I suppose you'll soon be on your way back to Paris."

"Paris!" cried François. "How pleasantly that name sounds in my ears after only five months of the country!"

But the Coquillard was not interested in François or his feelings and, finishing his drink, he said he'd be going. "Let me know if you need help," he said. "You've only to ask the landlord for Pierre and he'll put you in touch with me. Are there many of those hundred crowns in your purse?"

"A good number, all things considered," said François.

And, left alone at the table, he congratulated himself on his foresight in realising that Angers would have to be visited, for this fellow knew all about him. All he had to do was make his way back to Paris in a week or so, with the sad report for Colin that the wealth in Angers was much exaggerated.

A girl smiled at François and said she did not like to hear of young men with money to spend and nobody to spend it on. "Can I help you with those crowns?" she said.

"Your ears are too sharp," answered François. "They'll be getting you in trouble one day. But I've no doubt that you'll help me spend my money all right. All my money is spent on women and what's left over is pouched by the rascally innkeepers."

"Let's have a drink," said the girl.

When wine was brought, François told her that, for five months, he had only met country girls, who were not so much to his liking as girls of the town. "There are no women like the women of Paris!" he said.

"Don't you believe it for one moment!" she cried. "Have you seen a better figure than mine in your Paris?" And, seating herself on his knee, she told him to feel the shape of her; the firm moulded breasts, the supple thighs, the rounded behind.

"Have you ever stroked a prettier behind in all your Paris?" she said.

"I remember now that Angers is noted for its women," said François. "They say it's a low town with high steeples, poor scholars and rich harlots."

He pulled the girl closer to him and slipping his hand round her warm breast, drinking out of the same tankard, he spoke of his journey from Paris to Angers. "It was the first time I had been any distance from Paris," he said, "and I was lucky to have gold in my pocket. It allowed me to snuggle in the feathers at night like a lord and avoid the stinking communal rooms of the inns. I can't understand how those poor devils live who tramp the country without money, yet some of them do it out of piety or for pleasure."

The girl helped herself to more wine, saying that it took all sorts to make a world, although it was lucky for her there were not many of the pious kind in Angers.

François liked this girl with the frank manner and seductive body, and to gain her admiration he told her that he was a scholar and poet.

"That you're not, in spite of your gown," she said. "There's never one of those I've known with a single gold piece in his purse."

But in the midst of their argument, his face buried in the curls on her shoulder, François saw the door of the inn open and the Coquillard enter with another man, dusty and travel-stained. The Coquillard pointed in his direction and François thought that in some way he had been discovered as a fraud and felt for the dagger in his belt.

"This man has something to say to you," he announced. And, seeing François hesitate, he added that the message came from Colin de Cayeux.

At that name, panic came upon François and, pushing the girl from his knee, he took the messenger into a corner of the room and begged him to say quickly what was to be said.

"The message is urgent enough," the man answered, "but not so urgent that I haven't time for a drink. My throat is choked with dust, my tongue swollen to twice its normal size."

Impatiently François watched the drinking until at last the messenger had drunk his fill and slowly he then began, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. "Colin de Cayeux says you were right and that Guy Tabary was not to be relied upon. The betrayal of the robbery at the College of Navarre came about in this way. The fool Tabary was lunching at the tavern called La Chaise near the Little Bridge and in the house was a priest called Pierre Marchand, curé of Paray in Chartres. Guy Tabary, wishing to impress a simple countryman, asked the priest why he lived in the country where nothing ever happened and then boasted of his own adventures. Tabary told the priest that he had been held in the prisons of Paris and that they had accused him of being a burglar. Pierre Marchand pricked up his ears at this and began to question this precious Guy Tabary. The priest suggested that he might become a useful accomplice. Tabary jumped at the idea, saying they had been at a loss for an informer. The priest asked to see some of the picklocks Tabary had mentioned, but Tabary said that those they had used were thrown in the Seine, although Thibaud, the jeweller, would soon make them many more. Next day this meddling priest again met Guy Tabary, and stood him drinks in the Pomme de Pin, giving out that his dearest wish was to become one of the gang. Guy Tabary took the priest to Notre-Dame, where some of your friends were hiding in sanctuary, and introduced him to them as a newcomer. These had the sense to confine their talk to generalities and the priest went away no wiser than before. But madness had properly seized Tabary. Disappointed with the priest's reception, he spoke of the robberies which were planned when all their friends were at liberty. And with the bit properly between his teeth, Guy Tabary told Pierre Marchand that

he and four companions had robbed the College of Navarre. And finally this sluicing gossip of a fellow told the priest that they had another accomplice, François Villon, the well-known poet, who had gone to Angers to report on the wealth of a monk who lived there. Maybe this awoke too eager a gleam of interest in that priest's eye. Suspicion of the priest penetrated even Tabary's thick skull and, warning his friends of what he had done, he fled from Paris and sought shelter with Colin de Cayeux. And Colin, knowing that I had business in this part of the world, asked me to make haste to stop you from entering this town. He says the authorities in Paris may have sent word to Angers that you are to be arrested as soon as you arrive."

Arrested as soon as you arrive. François heard the words, but in his mind's eye he was far away in Paris, watching the meeting between Guy Tabary and the country priest. A chance word and the two were sitting together, the priest paying for the drinks and Tabary content that he should do so, for wouldn't most countrymen be glad of the privilege to stand treat to a Parisian who had such tales to tell?

"This priest will be a hero amongst his parishioners when he gets back home," muttered François, at last. "As for Guy Tabary, he shouldn't be blamed. He never could hold his drink."

"Couldn't hold his drink!" cried the messenger. "He ought to be cut up into pieces so small that a drop of rain could cover the greatest of them. Do you realise the position he's put you in?"

The man's urgency recalled François to himself. The chill went from his mind and, crying out, he said that he could not go back to Paris. "They'll string me up if I show my face there," he cried.

"You never spoke a truer word," answered the Coquillard.

François stared blankly at the man and then forgot him, lost in the contemplation of his own fate. He was to be a wanderer and outcast, hurrying restlessly from one hiding-place to the next, nameless, with nothing in his mind but thought of the gallows-tree and cut off from all that made life worth the living. Perhaps after many years Guillaume would be able to secure a pardon, but sacrilegious theft could not be easily excused and François knew that the penance would be heavier for him than most men. He would be cut off from all he loved so well; comfort and money would be gone. The habits of a gipsy were the best he could hope for, stealing and begging would be the least of his humiliations. His poetry would have to be read in many a country tavern so that boozing yokels might laugh and so be put in a humour to buy the poet food and drink. And he saw himself driven from orchards and haystacks by angry farmers, nipped in the shins by their dogs,

taken up by the police, questioned, driven on and on from town to town, twisted here and there uselessly like a leaf blown by the wind, looked at askance by all men, and come to such destitution that women held their skirts to one side as they passed him, and he would become used to this aversion, darkly obsessed by that terror of the gibbet which would ever be in his mind.

"I had been reckoning the days to be lived through before I could set out next month for Paris and now comes this." And, feeling the need for speech, he told the messenger about King René, who had lost his kingdom of Naples and now held court in his castle near Angers, making verses and living the simple life.

"They play at being poor and think they like it," François cried.

"I'd like to see them give away their money and try it in earnest," the messenger said. "They'd soon sicken of garlic and onions."

But François had again forgotten the man and the conversation. There had suddenly come into his mind a picture of Guillaume as he sat in Saint-Benoît, listening to the story of his nephew's crime. Kind friends would hasten to tell the latest of his sorrows, this Pierre Marchand would be taken along to explain his conversation with Guy Tabary, and the tale would lose nothing in its second telling. And when it was ended they would gather round Guillaume and shake their heads, saying that he must put François out of mind and memory. Or maybe the tramp of armed men would resound on the cobblestones of Saint-Benoît, the noise of soldiers escorting an examiner from the Châtelet, who would ask Guillaume and Marthe many questions and insist on searching the criminal's bedroom. But when his friends or the police spoke harshly of François, then the canon would smile his quiet smile and the others would go away abashed, muttering against men of religion who lacked zeal in their struggle against sin.

Thought of Guillaume calmed François and he asked the messenger if a note could be sent to his uncle in Paris.

"Delivery may be delayed," said the messenger. "Our organisation is at sixes and sevens, as you probably know."

"There's certainly no need for haste," said François. "No answer is expected and I can afford to wait a good many years."

The letter was difficult to compose but, after many hesitations, he contented himself by confessing his crime and begging his uncle's forgiveness. He gave thanks for the kindnesses he had received and begged that Guillaume would add to them by securing a pardon in as few years as possible. He ended by saying that he still believed they would again sit in Guillaume's house, discussing Aristotle or the latest philosopher come up from the country,

hoping to emulate Abélard and conquer the schools by his smooth discourse.

He could not share the hope he expressed but the old man must not be left without a grain of comfort. Nothing more could usefully be said, and as François signed his name he looked at the man who was to carry the message. The Coquillards were friends that he must avoid in future as eagerly as he would the police. He must forget their jargon and even their name, and were he hailed as François Villon, friend of Colin de Cayeux, his friendship and his name must be denied. This resolution must be kept or else he would be hanging from a country gibbet instead of a Parisian.

He broke from his thoughts and gave his letter, with a piece of gold, to the man.

"Don't you worry your head over it," he said. "The letter will reach your uncle, but if you'll take my advice, don't be so free with your gold. You'll be needing the whole of it before you're much older. If I were you, I should invest in a pedlar's pack and try to live on the proceeds of what you sell, keeping your gold in store for a rainy day. Buy relics of the saints and gauds for the women. They're always a safe investment and you will soon twist your tongue to the glib patter of the hawkers. You also have us of the Coquille and will attach yourself to one of our country organisations. A Parisian is always welcome."

"I'll remember what you say," said François. And saying good-bye to the man he returned to the table, and sat motionless, head sunk on arms, staring blankly at his own reflection in a pool of wine spilled on the table.

The girl was at his side again and, putting her arms round him, asked if he was yet ready to come to bed with her. François felt the heat of her body through the thin dress she wore and shivered in sudden desire. But he saw that he was falling into his old habits. His money must be saved and he also seemed to hear Colin's voice warning him. François Villon is to be stopped if possible before he enters Angers, Colin had said: and, with this cry in his mind, François told the girl that he must leave Angers at once.

"Then what about the time I've wasted this evening talking to you?" she cried. "Who's to pay me for that, I should like to know? You don't imagine your company is so pleasant that I want to give you mine for nothing, do you?"

She was working herself into a rage because she knew that an altercation with the watch was the last thing he wanted and, with an oath on all women, he threw money at the girl and left the tavern, hurrying to the nearest mercer's shop.

"You've come to the best man in Angers for a pedlar's pack," said the mercer. "There's not one with a better supply than mine. What is it you're wanting in particular?"

"Anything you like so long as there are relics of the saints and fineries for the women," answered François.

"A safe investment," said the mercer, "and I see you know your business, but they'll cost money."

Sight of gold restored the man's confidence and eagerly he enumerated his wares: praising the belts, gloves, buckles, chains, needles, jewel-cases, leather purses, strings for viols, and coloured pictures of the saints: a line that always paid very well. But François was in no mood for gossip and, bidding the man put in what was usually carried, he left the shop and made for the gates of the town. His brain was numbed by the shock of this catastrophe and could only think of the fate in store for his friends and himself, those merry friends who would be hunted down one by one until all their bones were, drying in the sun.

CHAPTER II

THIS fear of the gibbet kept François lonely that summer and he tramped the beautiful country around Tours with no eye for its beauty. He carried his pack from village to village, avoiding the towns, and selling his wares with circumspection even in the small inns and market-places. The sound of hooves behind him in a country lane was enough to send him shivering under a hedge and the sight of an archer shouldering his way through the crowd in a market-place made him forget his glib patter, pack up his goods, and slink away, muttering excuses to the country folk gathered about him. The loneliness of his life and thoughts was more than François could stand and, as the months passed slowly by, moroseness increased and obsessed him. The spirit was no longer in him to crack jokes with the country girls as he offered his jewellery or garters or charms that would infallibly bring them each a husband, and he soon came to be looked at askance by them all. Black looks came his way, dark hints of a murder committed and wild stories went before him of the Parisian who never smiled and frightened the little children. Little was sold from the pedlar's pack as a result and he was forced to live on his stock of gold, which rapidly dwindled. And when the winter came, with its snows and rain,

he was often near to surrender, wondering why he did not give himself up at the nearest town and so end the long drawn-out misery, for at least they would keep him warm until the rope was fixed round his neck. The clerical gown, tattered and worn, had long since been thrown in a hedge, and with it had gone his hope.

But in the early December of that year, 1457, François was still wandering aimlessly and found himself at an inn on the outskirts of Blois. Its walls and steeples showed picturesque amidst the whiteness of snow, but François had no interest in the houses of the rich save to envy their comfort and, without a backward glance, he entered the public room and ordered food and drink.

The room was noisy with the usual collection of travellers. There were friars and pilgrims and beggars and merchants and millers and farmers, and near to François sat three students deep in argument about Aristotle. Their jargon was like a voice from his own past, but his interest soon waned and there was nothing else in the room to hold his attention. It was a room like any other of a hundred he'd been in the last year, with the predominant smells of human bodies, and poultry roasting on the spit before the fire, whilst the shrill cries of the women rose above all other sounds.

As usual, François sat apart, damning them all, and cut off from normal intercourse by the knowledge that he was a wanted man. When he was not hawking the goods he had come to detest, then he could only turn in on his own black thoughts for company. His friends were better off. At least they would be together or in cheerful company. He was the unlucky one forced to bear his troubles alone, and idly he wondered if they ever thought of him. Maybe on occasion a flash of him would cross their minds as a line of poetry or a lucky joke was remembered, but memories were short. He could only be certain that Margot would not forget, but sit each evening sadly apart from her customers, having patience only for those who would listen to her tales of François Villon, the poet who used to sleep with her and bring all Paris to her house. And those of them who had the wisdom to praise the lines of his poetry she would certainly quote could reckon on free drink that evening. Nothing would make her abandon hope of seeing her lover again but François could not begin to see the end. Little hope was in him that day and he realised that he would eventually drink himself into a drunken stupor, his only protection against those moods of despairing memory.

But his attention was distracted by two men who sat with their heads together close behind him. He thought he heard them whisper: "Regnier was a clever fellow and not without influence but they got him for all that."

There must be many a Regnier in France, thought François, it can't be our Regnier. But these men dressed as pardoners had a look of the Coquillard about them and a risk had to be taken. "You will excuse me, gentlemen," he said, "but I heard you mention the name of Regnier, and as one of my good friends in Paris has that name I am curious to know if it is the same man."

"We spoke of no man called Regnier," said one of the men. "Let me tell you, we are devout men and don't know a soul in Paris. We don't want anything to do with prying, dishonest hawkers from Rennes. We have been warned against your kind."

"It seems I have made a mistake," said François. "I believed you had the look of friends; men who could jargon with the best of us and pitch rare stories of Colin de Cayeux and Regnier de Montigny and François Villon and fat Margot herself, the best tavern-keeper in Paris."

These names impressed the men and they asked who he was.

"My name is François Villon," he said.

"The poet, now in exile," they said, "and friend of Regnier de Montigny. It's curious we should meet you at this moment."

"And now will you tell me what you were saying of Regnier?"

The two men looked strangely at each other until the elder of them, shrugging his shoulders, said François had best prepare for evil news.

"Regnier de Montigny is dead," the man cried. "He has been cold these three months."

"Regnier dead so soon!" muttered François. "You must have made a mistake."

"No mistake about it," said the Coquillard. "I saw his dead body with my own eyes."

"Was it the plague?"

"Only the plague of the hempen cord. We saw your friend Regnier hanged in Paris on the sixteenth of September this year."

"We often joked of death," said François, "but never imagined it would come to us, and now the truth seems incredible. To think of Regnier hanging in chains. . ."

He hid his face in his hands and the Coquillard went on to tell him of Regnier's capture:

"Regnier de Montigny was taken up in Paris about the June of this year——"

"What possessed him to go back to the town where he knew they were looking for him?"

"That I don't know," answered the Coquillard, "but taken he was, along with Jacquet le Grand, a jeweller in alliance with him. Regnier had broken into a church, Saint-Jean en Grève, in company

with Nicholas de Launay, and they had taken the church vessels to Jacquet le Grand so that he might melt them down, but before the work could be completed both thieves and receiver were in prison. The King's lawyer, Babin, made out a strong case against Montigny and, believe me, nothing was forgotten. Three times already had he been in prison, at Tours, Rouen, and Bordeaux; a much-travelled criminal this was, an incorrigible rogue, a menace to the whole community of France, so said the lawyer. And in the face of this, the lawyer, Luillier, representing the Church, hadn't a chance. He did his best, pointing out that Regnier de Montigny was a clerk, unmarried, wearing gown and tonsure, and that even if he was incorrigible it was proper that he should be handed over to the Church authorities for punishment. But the laymen would not give up their prey and, on the ninth of September, Parliament confirmed the sentence of hanging. What a stir this caused amongst Regnier's respectable relations, so well known in legal and clerical circles! But would you believe that only one of them had the guts to speak in his favour and that a woman, his youngest sister——"

"That would be Jeanne," muttered François.

"Jeanne it was," said the Coquillard. "She, being with child, appealed to the King and said she would surely die if they hanged her brother. And the rest of the Montigny family chimed in and said that Regnier had suffered enough under the question and that in future they would see that he kept to the straight and narrow path. At this, the King granted letters of pardon on condition that Regnier was kept in prison for a year on bread and water and then made a pilgrimage to Saint-Jacques de Compostelle, bringing back a certificate from the priest of that church. This pardon mentioned Regnier's latest theft at Saint-Jean en Grève and another theft previously undiscovered, but those legal vultures were determined on your friend's death and declared that many of his crimes were not mentioned. They also said that he did not confess any of his crimes until torture had been applied, although who but a fool would do so? In short, they would have their way against King or Pope and, on the fifteenth September, Parliament finally confirmed the sentence. There was no more hope in this world for Regnier de Montigny; no other ambition save to make as good an end as possible, and that I assure you he did. I've never seen a man so cool in the face of death. He took the cup of wine from the sisters with an elegant bow, not spurning it churlishly as so many of them do, and made his last drink a toast to the prettiest of them. His speech to the assembled crowd was exactly right, offhand and witty, without a single whine, and he joked with the hangman even as the rope was put round his neck. And as Regnier swung into

space all the women were blessing his handsome face, and crying, that such a man should have the life choked out of him so early——”

“There, mate, don’t take on so,” interjected the other Coquillard. “We’ve all got death coming to us sooner or later and the way of our going or the time of it is all the same when we’re amongst the gone.”

“I know that well enough,” answered François. “I’ve often stood in the Cemetery of the Innocents, staring at the heaped-up skulls and thinking that it would be a wise man could tell a pope from a murderer or a queen from a harlot. But Regnier was young, little older than I am, and full of life. I left him a year back in hope and anticipation of an early meeting, with the sudden realisation of our friendship, and now he is dead.”

“It can’t be helped and you’d best look after your own skin,” said the first Coquillard. “If you’d care to join us, we should have no objection. Three false pardoners can travel as well as two and the life we lead is easy enough. There are many folk anxious to pay in hard gold to make certain of their place amongst the angels.”

“Thanks for your offer,” said François, “but I prefer to keep by myself.”

“O, it’s all the same to us,” the Coquillard said, “and if you’ve got a profitable line, there’s no point in changing.”

François was thankful they should view the matter so easily, and he took the opportunity to mutter his thanks and hurry from the inn as if the devil was behind him, for once grateful that the wind blew coldly in his face.

The noise of the tavern and the clatter of horses outside were soon left behind. François had no recollection of any road but found himself sitting on a snow-covered log, staring helplessly at the river beneath him. What he saw was not the Loire in winter flood but the melancholy procession that escorted Regnier to the gibbet of Paris. Regnier and he, along with their companions, had often followed similar processions. And now Regnier, the best of them all, had been the first to go. Regnier had journeyed out of Paris in a cart, with his hands tied behind him, his only consolation the cup of wine given by the sisters at Saint-Denis to all condemned criminals, and he had stepped out of the cart and mounted the steps of the gibbet ironically called Montigny. And François saw him making his last short speech to the gaping, milling crowd; bareheaded, his black hair streaming in the breeze, the eyes of all the women gazing fascinated at the whiteness of the neck already bared for the rope. His talk would be light and cynical to the end. Regnier would die as he had lived, carelessly and flippantly. Did he advise his listeners to repentance and good ways of living,

they would understand that even then he spoke with his tongue in his cheek, and told his true mind when he advised them to enjoy themselves as much as they could. They had little enough time and would soon follow him to the grave. The hangman, at a sign from the priest, would then touch Regnier on the shoulder, the noose would be round his neck and in an instant it would be all over and the body lurching and twisting at the rope's end, whilst the crowd moved away, sorry that a handsome young man should come to such an ending but satisfied that crime did not pay.

In that second, thought François, Regnier was finished. Jerk a rope and a man's life is gone from him, he falls into blankness and it is as if he had never been. What little things we are, crawling on the face of the earth, so proud of ourselves and our achievements and our morality. Is it possible to believe that a part of Regnier exists in the infinite? Has a schoolmaster God been keeping a list of his misdeeds so that he has gone to roast in hell?

But he soon returned to the more positive horrors of the gibbet of Montigny. He was alone with the poor body twisting, and saw the red mark of the rope around Regnier's neck; the ludicrous sag of his head to one side; the rain and the snow washing the body until its clothes were rotted away; the sun beating down and scorching it; the birds circling around with shrill cries and fighting over the helpless remains, pecking until the corpse was a hideous sight, without eyes or beard or even eyebrows, and finally the bones would powder and crumble until the authorities decided that what was left could not serve as a useful example to others for it was no longer a man, and one morning the remains would be cut down into a basket and tossed into a nameless grave. François gave up hope for himself and he ran his hands over his body, wondering what it would look like as it rotted in the wind and the rain. Much like any other, he thought, much like any other. And the stress of his fear drove him from his seat to run helter-skelter along the frozen road, his mind twitching in the agony of his fright.

And a voice said: "Why do you stare so hard at the duke's castle, mate? It's not in your mind to break open a window, I hope, for I put the new catches on them myself and you'll have your work cut out if that's the idea."

François turned hastily and saw a round-faced, cheery fellow taking a rest from carrying the load of wood piled on his back. "I didn't notice a castle," he muttered.

"Why, there it is, staring you right in the face!" cried the man. "Big enough to be seen, I'm sure, and the home of my master, Charles of Orléans. But I can see you're not yourself. Have you come over queer, man?"

"No, I'm not ill," answered François, "but I've just had the bad news that a friend of mine is dead."

"Well, it's poor enough consolation," said the man, "but they do say that we've all got to come to it sooner or later. But you don't look the usual sort we see in these parts, mate, and if the question isn't a rude one, what are you doing round here?"

"I'm from Paris."

"I'm carpenter to the Duke of Orléans," the man said, "and if it could only have happened that you were a poet——"

"But I am a poet, and was well known all over Paris."

"Then, mate, your luck's in, for there's a hearty welcome awaiting you in the castle yonder," cried the carpenter. "The duke is a great poet and is surrounded by other poets, who live in luxury at the castle and scribble poetry for a living. It seems a queer sort of a life to me but great gentlemen are allowed their weaknesses, and the duke is always on the watch for new poets. If you should turn out to be a good one, there's a gold crown in prospect for me. But, mark you, I won't hear a word spoken against the duke. He is loved by us all round about here for miles and the poor man has suffered enough to turn anybody's head to poetry, or worse things. He was a captive in England for twenty-five years, and those savages kept him chained up in that land of fog for a lifetime. Why, it's enough to embitter a man the rest of his days, even though he lives to be a hundred and fifty. But the duke is a rare kind gentleman. He'll meet you with a smile on his face and greet a poor working-man as if his equal, aye, and remember your childer, like as not, and ask after them by name. And if it should turn out that you're disappointed in love, as well as a poet, then your fortune's made, for when it's not thought of poetry then it's love that fills all minds up there. Even the duke, who cares only for his good lady, writes poetry to women of his imagination. A regular game it is, and such pining and moaning and constancy as was never known in any other place but Blois."

"Disappointed in love is a mild expression," said François. "My exile from Paris has come about through a woman, and because of that woman I have been publicly whipped."

"Beaten naked for love!" cried the carpenter. "Then you're all right for a bed and lodging so long as you care to stay at the castle. Come along with me, give a hand with this wood and, in return, I'll show you the way to get an audience with the duke."

The chance of this unexpected offer seemed too good to be true. Refuge and a quiet place to hide himself were needed. But François told himself that the duke might not like his poetry, certainly he would not like his appearance; and maybe this carpenter was not

quite right in the head. But as he staggered along the road with his load of wood, and listened to the carpenter's cheerful talk, his spirits rose in spite of himself and he was ready to believe that his luck had changed. And the carpenter went on telling François of the use they were going to make of the wood up at the castle.

"So far as I can make out," he said, "it's this time some new-fangled contrivance for making water draw more easily from a well. The duke's often getting these ideas in his head and I must say that on paper they look pretty. But in practice they are usually unworkable. Moreover, I shall be bothered and hampered in my work by a lot of useless amateurs, and when it's discovered that water can't be drawn from the well at all, the blame will be heaped on my head and I shan't dare to say a word for myself. Sometimes I think I get my wages by saying: 'Gentlemen, here's my arse. Please kick it.' But seriously, why do poets always imagine they are practical men and able to work better with their hands than us labourers?"

"I'm sure I can't tell you," said François, "but it's a thing I should never imagine or desire."

"Here's the gate I always use," said the carpenter.

And opening the small postern gate with his own key he told François to dump his wood by the wall, whilst he went to find the duke's secretary. Left alone again, François stood staring at the white, gleaming towers of the castle and tried in vain to imagine himself living in such a palace.

CHAPTER III

THE carpenter soon came back, saying that the duke's secretary had agreed to see François, and as they walked together over the lawns of the castle he said that it had not been easy to get a hearing.

"This secretary, Jean Caillau, is also the duke's physician," the carpenter said, "and a mean, sarcastic devil like most of that kind, just now puffed up more than usual with his own importance because the duke's lady will soon be having a baby. Ah, there's no love lost between us, I'll tell you, but he had to see you because he knows he can't do as he likes with me. My work is too much valued by the duke."

"It was kind of you to go to such trouble for my sake," said François.

"I'll be amply rewarded if you get into favour with the duke,"

answered the carpenter, "and put that bastard doctor's nose out of joint. Now here's his room and, if you don't mind, I'll make myself scarce as soon as I've taken you in. The less I see of that man the better. I'm sure the parson has him in mind when he speaks of the devil in church on a Sunday."

The door closed behind the carpenter, leaving François with the sense of a lost friend, and loneliness came over him once more. His first sight of Jean Caillau did nothing to lessen the desolation for the secretary was a tall, lean man with a supercilious manner, and as François stood before him he was conscious that his own ragged clothes and dirty, broken shoes were strangely out of place in that room with the thick pile carpet and rich furniture. The contrast pointed the depths to which he had sunk in the last year, for in Paris he had visited houses as richly furnished and had chatted with men of a great deal more importance than this secretary, under whose gaze he dare not raise his eyes from the carpet.

"So you are the poet from Paris, are you?" said Jean Caillau. "Your poetry does not seem to have done you much good and, from the look of you, I should have thought you better suited to apply at the kitchen door."

The spirit had gone from François and he dared not trust himself to speak. The secretary watched his sullen face for a moment and then, with a shrug of the shoulders, he told François to follow him and led the way to the duke's room, saying that there was no accounting for the whims of a royal personage, especially when he happened to be a poet.

The room was long and narrow, with large windows at the far end overlooking the pleasant terraces of the castle. The duke himself was sitting before these windows, pen in hand, having paused from his writing to watch peacocks on the terrace-steps outside.

From that first sight of him, François realised the duke's patience and delight in the beautiful, but his consciousness of the man was delayed by sight of the books on the shelves of the room. There was little other decoration, and no furniture save a charcoal stove and a wooden desk littered with candles. But as François glanced at the titles of the books the hope went from him, for he could see nothing but dull works of Latin history or theological treatises; little sympathy for himself or his troubles would be gotten from the reader of such books. Why had they raised his hopes by speaking of the duke as a poet? It seemed that he had the mind of a parish priest, who would soon throw his visitor into the road again, and this sudden quenching of hope recalled the vision of Regnier de Montigny standing in the cart of death as it rumbled to the gallows.

The secretary was plucking at his sleeve and François saw that the duke had left his study of the peacocks and turned in his chair to greet this strange visitor introduced by his carpenter. Blue eyes the duke had, kindly blue eyes, not the hard probing eyes of the theologian he expected and, taking heart again, François apologised for his absentmindedness and explained that the duke's library reminded him of his uncle's library at Saint-Benoît in Paris.

"Saint-Benoît in the University quarter," said the duke. "But what is the nephew of such a man doing so far from the rue Saint-Jacques?"

"Rue Saint-Jacques!" muttered François. "The first time I've heard the name in months and it is curious that a name so familiar should now seem strange."

The duke noticed his emotion and, waving Jean Caillau from the room, he asked François to sit down and tell as much of his story as he thought proper.

At last François muttered that he was like a bruised dog who suddenly received a bone instead of the kicks to which he has been used, and then began to tell the duke Charles of his upbringing in Saint-Benoît and the uncle who had sent him to the University at his own expense.

"But somehow I did not take kindly to studying," cried François. "The atmosphere of the cloister too became irksome to me and, after I had obtained my master's degree, I threw away my books, giving myself over to dicing and drinking and running after women in the taverns. Catastrophe came when my letters of nomination to a priesthood were refused, owing to a foolish frolic with the police. Even when my uncle saw all his hopes for me defeated he did not despair, but secured me work as copyist at a lawyer's house in the hope that I should one day secure the forgiveness of the Church. But life in the lawyer's house was dull. I felt I should go mad there and soon enough I sought out my tavern companions. My nights were again passed in drunken carousals and then an unfortunate love-affair with a cruel woman, who caused me to receive a public whipping, made me the laughing-stock of Paris. I could not hold my head up again and I took the money I had luckily won at dice, said good-bye to my uncle and left Paris, hoping to forget the scornful fingers which pointed me out as I passed down the rue Saint-Jacques or hurried with bent head through the Cité. That was almost a year ago, sir. The money I had won soon went and these months have indeed been a penance to me, a stranger in a strange land. The road is a hard place for men with little money in their purses and I, a graduate of Paris and Master of Arts, have been forced to live a hand-to-mouth existence peddling goods of all sorts

to the peasants, giving thanks to the Virgin if I could earn enough to buy food and keep a shelter over my head at nights. But my sufferings have probably been no worse than those of many a pilgrim forced by piety to tramp through France and I feel I can't show my face again in Paris yet awhile."

François could not be certain whether this story of half-truths was believed or not. The truth could not have been told. It would have been madness to say that he had killed a priest, was wanted for robbery and sacrilege, and had just heard that his friend was dangling from a gibbet in Paris. God grant that the duke ignored any suspicions he might have, for François knew that it would be the death of him if he was thrust out to wander in the snow, and with a sigh of relief he heard Charles ask if it was true that he wrote poetry.

"They told me you were a poet," the duke said, "and, in the selfish way that rich men have, I thought I might profit from your misfortunes. Do not tell me that my carpenter made a mistake?"

"The name of François Villon is well known in Paris, perhaps not in the literary drawing-rooms, but in the taverns there's no doubt that my poems have great popularity. But they were fitted only for such company and would compare badly with your polished work, sir, and the other real poets of the country."

"I sometimes consider my work a little too polished," said Charles, "and I'd be willing to swear you've never read a word of it, you young rascal. Have you any of these poems about you, the poetry that was so pleasing to the ear of the tavern drinkers?"

"When I left Paris, I thought I'd leave behind something they would remember me by and so I wrote a poem, a poem that somehow became a mock will, and there's a copy in my pack."

"Get it," said Charles, "and I'll order some food to be brought here so that you can eat whilst I am reading your poem."

The poem was read in silence and, when François had eaten and drunk his fill, the lack of comment became a criticism and, watching the duke carefully wiping his spectacles, he said that he didn't imagine it likely that the duke or anybody out of Paris would appreciate the work.

"But at this moment they are laughing over it in the taverns of Paris and wondering where the poet is, thinking of him regretfully between one drink and the next."

"Have you been inspired to write more poetry since you left Paris?" asked Charles.

The question sounded sarcastic and François said that inspiration came to no man on an empty stomach.

"That's probably true," answered Charles, "but I won't conceal

from you that your poem is in parts excellent. There's no doubt that you have talent, maybe there are the seeds of something greater in this poem, but whether those seeds ever sprout depends on you and I should imagine the outcome is doubtful. Your talents are different from mine. Poetically our paths are opposite but I hope I have sufficient ability to recognise another's merit, even if it is different from my own."

"There's many would recognise it," interjected François, "but few would have the grace to own the merit."

"A man should lose envy as he grows older," answered the duke, "and it is one of my pleasures to help the poets of France. You have probably heard of the life we live at Blois and it is said that all our poets at some time in their lives come to Blois. They receive a fixed wage, and although you'll have an incongruous look amongst them I fancy that is their misfortune, and you can come here if you wish. I shall not attempt to chain you and you can stay as long as you like."

"You have come like a saviour to me, sir."

"You don't mean that," answered Charles, "and I know it is an impertinence for a man to offer help because he happens to be rich. But you must understand that it is not charity. I rope genius to my chariot and make men of talent pander to the whim of an old man. The fact that it is an ancient custom of princes is no excuse and I sometimes despise myself, wondering if I hinder the Muse I think to help."

And suddenly the duke told François of his past life. "I did not always flee from life in this way," the duke Charles said. "When the disaster came at Agincourt I was a young man, but when the English archers routed our men I was picked up wounded, made prisoner and carried off to England. The years dragged on and I lived in that land of fog, sighing for the warm sun of France. I was not badly treated and was allowed all the freedom possible to a prisoner but I was turned more and more on myself for company. There I used to sit, yearning for my own people and country, praying that death could release me if I could not see them again. I was there for twenty-five years."

"Purgatory for a young man, sir."

"The blood ran hot in my veins as your own, and yet for twenty-five years I was an exile from all I knew and loved. Distraction was necessary or else madness would have ended my suffering, and that distraction I found in poetry. I always had a gift for verse-making but it was no greater and no more considered than that possessed by many young men about court. Imprisonment taught me to cultivate that gift so that I turned more and more to the writing of

poems. In this way I found relief. And after twenty-five years I was released from England. But I found that I had lost touch. The only friend I had left was Philip of Burgundy, now become the enemy of the King of France and killer of my own father, so that I realised any worldly ambitions I had were ended. I was not sorry to find this, for my imprisonment had unfitted me for life at court. I therefore retired to my estates here at Blois, almost a country in themselves, and, with my wife by my side, peace has been found. My twenty-five-years' exile in a foreign country was a blessing in disguise, for it allowed me to discover the poet in myself. My amusements are few. I read and play cards and chess, or hunt in the woods around the castle, and I love to ramble along the river banks. But my greatest pleasure is still in verse-making. Sometimes poets outside Blois, aye, from the other end of France, send me their poems to read, and all the young men who stay here a night or two are expected to write a verse of poetry as payment for hospitality. In this way, I like to think that I find a better use for my money than do those other nobles who spend their money on the pomp of war or in useless pageantry."

Abruptly as he had started, the duke finished his story, and as he sat with his head resting on his hand, François took the opportunity to study this prince of the royal blood who spoke so humbly of himself and the life he was living. Charles of Orléans was a man of about sixty years, with grey hair and large prominent features, clean-shaven, and wearing clothes of simple black velvet trimmed with fur. On the chair by the side of the table was his hat, a large black hat of old-fashioned design. François had never been so attracted to a man at first sight as he was to this unostentatious prince, whose life had been so undeservedly hard and who now proposed to end it not in seeking ways of revenge but in kindly occupations: in gardening and the devising of contraptions for the better drawing-up of water and in the deliberate cult of verse-making.

"Will you accept my offer of a home and fixed wage at Blois?"

"Fool I may have been, but I'm not such a fool as to refuse that kindness," answered François.

"You will find some jealousy amongst these poets of mine," said the duke. "I do not doubt that these poems you have shown me are your own work but there may be others who will murmur the suspicion against you. It is a practice here to hold competitions. A certain theme or line of poetry is suggested and each of us writes a poem on that subject. Then we meet in the Great Hall, each poem is read aloud, and the one acclaimed the best is awarded the palm. The present competition closes in three days and the set line

is: 'Je meurs de seuf au près de la fontaine.' My suggestion is that you too write a poem on that subject and so announce yourself to the rest of them."

"That I will do," said François. "The sentiment could not have been better designed for me had I chosen it myself. But for this last year, when I have been far enough away from any fountain, I have all my life been dying of thirst near the fountain. I believe I shall justify your good opinion of me."

"I hope you will," said the duke. "The strangeness of your coming seems to promise something out of the ordinary. And I will give instructions that a room should be prepared for you, with a new set of clothes so that you may start afresh and forget your troubles. But remember that you have only three days to compose your poem and so apply yourself diligently to the writing."

"I will think of nothing else," said François. "I don't want anything to go wrong now, sir, for I can assure you that it would be a pleasure to feel secure and draw wages."

And as François was following the servant from the room, Charles suddenly asked if he played cards.

"I used to play a little in Saint-Benoît with my uncle," François answered, "but I am afraid that lack of patience and concentration made me a poor player."

"We must play together," said the duke, "for my wife also loves a game of cards. I'll hope to teach you patience as well as pay your wages."

CHAPTER IV

FRANÇOIS followed the servant down the corridors, and as he walked behind the man he could hardly contain himself for joy. His quick delivery from what appeared certain death had gone to his head and the magnificent household of which he had so incongruously become a part added to his hilarity. They passed through a large drawing-room in which were grouped about a dozen men, one of them declaiming poetry in a high-pitched, affected voice. At their entry, the speaker stopped his recital, throwing the manuscript on the table whilst he raised his glass to study this tramp come so suddenly amongst them. The others followed his example, but their scrutiny failed to disturb François, whose pertness and good spirits had returned as if by magic since his interview with the duke. Once more he was the urchin of the Paris streets, ready for any game

and confident in his own star. Quietly he studied these men and saw nothing to disturb his confidence for they looked of one type: pale characterless hangers-on, he thought, with not a pennyworth of talent amongst the lot of them.

But his contempt was not shared by the servant, who was ready with apologies for disturbing the gentlemen, explaining that there was no other way of reaching the room to which he was conducting this new poet the duke had taken on. Bowing low, the man took François by the elbow, and as the door closed behind them François heard the chatter of amazement and anger from his future colleagues. He would have liked to listen at the door to their comments but the servant strode on, anxious to get him to his room.

François stared amazedly round the room, each moment finding some unaccustomed luxury to catch his eye: the delicate colour of the walls like a lady's boudoir, the rich furniture, the stools and many cushions, the thickness of the carpet, the silk-covered bed, even the large warming-pans for the bed.

The servant was standing at the door asking if anything was wanted, and realising the man's aversion François asked how he liked serving such a scarecrow as himself. "Your pretty yellow stockings were never meant for such a one as me! A man broken-down and worn, the spirit nigh gone out of him, in tattered clothes as if he'd been dragged through a hedge backwards, with an ugly scar down one side of his mouth, comes to a palace and is received like a prince. There's a moral in this, fellow, were you not too dense to see it, the triumph of mind over matter. A man of parts always finds a welcome from those who know how to recognise merit and these clothes on the bed will make me nothing different from any coxcomb who has strutted in this sort of a place all his life."

"I don't doubt that, sir," said the man, "and I would advise a bath as the first step to that achievement."

He left François standing with the pedlar's pack on his arm, but when he rushed after him he found a pretty lady's maid just outside the door.

"Why do you stare so?" she asked.

"I'd forgotten that there are pretty women in this world," answered François. "Ah, a woman like yourself is a pleasant sight to a man starved of women for months. Come into my room, for I want you to take charge of this pedlar's pack."

"I can take the pack without going into your room," she said.

But François pulled her into the room and shut the door.

"You'll have my mistress calling for me," said the girl, "and if

I'm found in your room there'll be a rare upset. This is a quiet Christian house, let me tell you, and well conducted."

"I'm sure it is," said François; "but is there never a scandal in a house where poets sit all day writing poetry to women?"

"Writing is all they are fit for!" muttered the girl. "Weak puny creatures, I believe they'd faint if they saw a woman's naked thigh."

"Now you're telling me they'd faint, are you?" cried François. "There's one lying on this bed who'd do no such thing."

"There's no need to tell me that," said the girl. "One look into your black eyes is enough to show that you're not a shy one. But tell me, is it true that you're all the way from Paris? And what is it like in that town?"

"Come and sit beside me on the bed, little one, tell me your name and in return I'll recount you fine tales of Paris."

"I'm called Marguerite," she said, "and I did not seek you out to share a bed, not at this time of the day."

"So you sought me out, did you?" cried François.

"Certainly I did, for I wanted to see what a real Parisian was like. Tell me, are the tales true that are told of Paris?"

"True, of course they're true," said François, "and a thousand more that are only whispered. It is well known that there the phantom wolf walks easily through shut doors and plays havoc in the night, slipping gently between husband and wife in bed so that the wife believes it is her husband playing with her until she stretches out her hand to stroke his cheek and finds it hard and bristly, with long ears on top. She lets out a scream but by then it is too late. She spends her time wondering if she will be brought to bed of a child with a wolf's head and human body, in which case she would certainly be burned as a witch. Or there is also——"

"Oh, I know you take me for a childish country girl," said Marguerite. "But I want to hear interesting tales, such as the one represented by that scar on your mouth, and also your reason for leaving Paris."

"I see you have a discretion in your story-telling," said François. "We shall get on well together, and I'll entertain you with stories of myself and in other ways you may not know. I'll also recount amusing and instructive stories of the ways in which my companions and I used to obtain fish, tripe, bread, wine, and roast meat free of charge by means of a few choice tricks from the grasping tradesmen of Paris."

"That sounds more interesting than fairy tales," said Marguerite; "and now I'll be leaving you, as my mistress may be crying out for me. She's expecting a baby within the next few days and mistresses

get difficult at such times. What's more, I find that even a Parisian may be more attractive when he's had a bath and put on a clean suit of clothes."

"It's true that I stink then," said François. "That rascal of a servant hinted as much and there's no wonder at that, seeing the life I've been leading this last year. But in the meantime, will you be keeping this pedlar's pack safe for me? You are free to take whatever gaud suits your fancy."

"I can keep it safe for you," said Marguerite, "but surely you're not thinking of leaving Blois to go on your travels again? The duke is a good master, he must have taken a liking to you, and I hope you will stay here. You look different and alive, not like these others."

"I'm glad to hear I've still enough life left in me to impress you," said François, "and I hope that enough sense will be given me to know when I've fallen lucky. But I'm an unstable sort of a fellow, unstable as the clouds, and so clean up the pack for me and keep it in case of accident."

And kissing the girl, rumpling her mop of curly fair hair, François pushed her from the room and began to wash and dress himself. A bath had never been so comforting, and when he came to dress, he found the duke had not imposed his own taste in dress on his guest. The clothes on the bed were in the latest fashion, and as François surveyed himself in the narrow-cut suit, and tried on the velvet Italian toque, he thought of the ragamuffin and the student left behind in the bath with his lice. He looked like a courtier in those fine feathers and, throwing himself on the bed, he began to think of the woman who had just left his room. She was about his own age, small and dainty, with a voluptuous, curved body, just as he liked his women. He liked her coolness, innocence never had attracted him, and stretching himself out in delight he foresaw many a pleasant hour in prospect with her in his room. He was almost off to sleep, so tired was his body, but his mind was too alert and, jumping from the bed, he crossed to the window and stood looking out over the courtyard and gardens of the castle to the forest beyond.

The castle was like a small self-contained country in itself, and he swore that it would need pikes and swords to prod him out of its comforts into the forest beyond. How he hated the countryside, with its trees and fields, and no better offering for rest and shelter than a haystack! Never again would he watch another dawn as he shivered in the open, cursing the birds that shattered the early silence with their senseless cries, heralding the approach of yet another weary day. Another Guillaume had been

offered to him as protector and never would he run a risk of throwing away such luck.

And as he turned from the window his thoughts went back to the girl who had visited his room. Since leaving Paris, he had known only the uncomfortable caresses of the town harlots, she would be the first country girl he had enjoyed and he imagined himself sitting in front of a warm fire with the girl on his knee, a bottle of wine at his elbow and capons roasting before the fire. He and his friends, Regnier especially, had used to chase servant-girls in Paris and rumple them. . . .

His thought swerved quickly from Regnier and he thought of the poem he must write to ensure his staying at Blois. The next three days were spent in the writing, and he did not leave his room in that time save for a short stroll in the gardens each day. His meals were brought to him and, at the duke's order, he was left alone. He only met the duke himself, who came to see how the poem was progressing. The writing had not been easy for the sudden change in living had made François lazy, and all he wanted to do was to lounge in his room and eat and drink and give himself up to the luxury of feeling whole and alive again. The thought that spurred him on to effort was only the realisation that all this comfort and safety would be lost and he'd be wandering once more in the snow if his poem did not please the duke. It was his opinion that the duke intended to keep him no matter what sort of a poem he wrote. His laziness told him to trust in that belief but thought of the last year's misery made him decide to risk nothing. The poem was interesting for it consisted of contradictions, and his life and his character were full of contradictions. And as he finally threw down his pen, satisfied that he had written the best that was in him, François noticed a phrase he had written which stared mockingly at him: "Je riz en pleurs."

That is what I have always done, he thought. Even so far back as the student riots, my gaiety was a strange, forced gaiety, a madness that seemed to possess me with its own strength, needing no sign from me, and sometimes giving pleasure of a kind to others but never a glimpse of happiness to me. Shadows I have always pursued, yet known they were shadows. And, throwing himself on the bed, he tried to follow the train of thought aroused by the sudden light thrown on his own nature, asking himself how a man could pursue strange idols, knowing they were false. And the best explanation he could find was that there came a kind of perversity from within himself which was beyond explanation. There it was and nothing would alter a man's disposition. In any case, I am now resting on the feathers of a bed, he thought, and so to hell with

speculations on the nature of François Villon. Such are profitless. Am I now leaning over the Seine in one of my black moods of old-time that I should bother myself about myself? There's no reason to worry at the moment. All this is behind and I can reasonably look forward to the start of a new life, and maybe I shall find a new nature to match it, my hardships having taught me a needed lesson.

François remembered the chance-found companion who had brought him to the duke, and rolling the manuscript of his poem, he left it in the secretary's room and went to see if his friend, the carpenter, happened to be in the castle or tinkering with a well. There was no sign of him and, finding his way to the kitchen, François quickly made friends with the cook and the other servants, telling them hurried tales of Paris, whilst his eyes searched the shadows for sign of the pretty servant who had come to his room. She was evidently with her mistress and, having no excuse to stay in the kitchens, he wandered back to his own room, thinking regretfully of the compliments he had hoped to whisper in her ear. The girl had not been near his room since that first day and so he was surprised to find her waiting inside, her hand to his mouth to stifle any cry of excitement he might make.

"I came to tell you that the baby has been born," she said, "and both mother and child are doing well. I thought you could be one of the first to congratulate the duke and so impress yourself still more on his mind."

"What's the birth of a puling brat to me?" cried François. "There'll be fawning enough round the duke and he'll not miss my pretty little speech."

"It's easy to see that you're no courtier," Marguerite answered, "but if you won't take advice that's given you for your good, then you must leave it."

And excitedly she spoke of the baby, saying it was a girl and that they intended to christen her Marie. "There'll be rejoicings over this," she cried, "and jubilation for months to come, with presents and extra pay for all of us."

But François was thinking of other things and, drawing her to him, he kissed her fiercely and pulled her to the bed. Already excited and flushed, Marguerite made no pretence at struggle but ardently returned his kisses, and as his fingers fumbled with the fastenings of her dress she impatiently pulled it from her and flung herself almost naked into his arms. The strength of her passion matched even that of his own starved senses and he soon lost consciousness of himself or time.

At last, Marguerite lay passively in his arms, breathing heavily

when suddenly she opened her eyes with a cry of alarm, saying that it was the afternoon the poems were to be read. "You will be late for the reading," she cried.

But François wished for nothing to disturb the peace of that moment and, muttering that they had his poem and could read it as often as they liked, he tried to force her head back on the pillow.

"No, you will only offend the duke," she said, "and will perhaps lose the home you have been given. What a fool you are, man, to risk the loss of a good living for the passion of a moment. It isn't as if we haven't another day to live."

"The meeting will be cancelled," muttered François. "Surely the duke won't want to read poetry when his wife has just given birth to a daughter?"

"Then you don't know the duke," cried Marguerite. "Poetry comes before everything with him, even though he does love his wife; and, in any case, she's safe enough now. So get off to the Great Hall where the poems will be read. It's better to turn up late than not at all."

The spell was broken, his satisfaction had as usual lasted only a short minute and sulkily François got off the bed and began to make himself look presentable.

"There's no need to look so miserable," Marguerite said. "Now that my mistress is tied to her bed, I'll be able to come to your room almost as often as I please."

And on that promise he was forced to leave her, and make his way to the Hall as fast as his trembling legs would allow.

But he was too late for the reading and he arrived just in time to hear the duke saying: "Gentlemen, you must all agree that there is no need for discussion. The best poem was the one I read last, a very fine poem indeed, and I am pleased to welcome here a poet of such quality. May François Villon give us pleasure with many another poem and put us all to rout as he has done on this occasion!"

François got to his feet, mumbling his thanks, and as the duke looked at him across the room he felt proud for the first time in his life. His poetry he had always regarded as a means to an end. It made his tavern friends laugh and so earned him popularity, but now it had impressed an expert, a prince of the royal blood, yet called the greatest poet of his time.

And, with a smile, the duke said that François Villon could remain at Blois secure in the knowledge that he would see his wages. "What is more, François, I shall give myself the pleasure of writing your poem in that book which is reserved for the best poems written in this house. And now, gentlemen, I crave permission to

leave you. It has pleased God to give my wife a daughter and there is much that needs attention."

The gossip broke out again when he left the room and most of the poets gathered together protectively, leaving François sitting by himself. Like a lot of cackling old women, he thought, but realising that he would have to see these men every day, and so might as well try to make himself agreeable, he turned to one of the younger men, who had stayed near him, and asked why these others seemed to hate him so.

"They are jealous," said the young man. "A first poem has never been so praised before by the duke and now they are busy proving to themselves that your poetry is not poetry at all."

"Why did the duke like it then?" asked François.

"They are saying that the duke manages to make himself believe what he wants to believe or that his wife's pregnancy has taken his judgment from him."

Revulsion came upon François. Why should he seek to make friends with these men when he would rather pander to the lowest scavengings of the tavern, and with a laugh he turned his back on them and left the room. A fellow of low breeding: he heard the murmur behind him, but he already knew where to find company much more to his liking.

CHAPTER V

LIFE flowed gently at Blois and François was soon at his ease in the castle. It was necessary to take some part in the regular routine of the community but he made his share of the communal life as little as possible. His meals had to be eaten with the other poets and often with the duke. Their poetic games and competitions too must be attended, and François was not surprised to discover that, in their company, he was never inspired to write a poem worth reading but could only sit scribbling senseless caricatures of his brother poets or openly yawning at their fatuities. Neither had he interest in learning for its own sake or in the scientific experiments of the duke. It did not matter to him how water was drawn from a well. Were a contrivance discussed for the turning of water to wine, then he might prick up his ears. But the duke and his friends spent much of their time in long discussions of literature and mathematics and philosophy and science and theology. And François could not conceal his boredom, for it seemed to him that,

the more learned men become, the more they fog their understanding. As time passed, his infrequent attendances at these discussions became fewer, until finally he was never seen in the drawing-room and his colleagues were murmuring in the duke's ear against this newcomer who was never to be found in his proper place but always in the kitchen with low company, making fun of his betters.

But the duke did not rebuke what they called this gross neglect and, in their futile anger, the poets dubbed François the duke's unwashed favourite, and wrote sarcastic jingles of poetry in his honour; gibes that only made François more insolent than ever, persistent in his liking for the company of kitchenmaids and gardeners. He knew that the duke would let him go his own way. All Charles required was the pleasure of a daily walk together and François came to value that walk. And if the weather was bad they had their talk indoors, occasionally playing cards with the duchess, but the duke usually preferred him to speak of his life in Paris.

And so François came once more to like the sound of his own voice. It did not much matter that instead of his rowdy friends he had this quiet, courteous man as audience, for he found that he could talk as well or even better than he did in the taverns. The duke could enjoy a good joke and François even found himself speaking of his friends in the taverns and his fellow-students at University, telling of many a prank played in their company and the clashes with the police. But trouble between students and police had been a tradition for many years and Charles only laughed, recalling similar incidents of his young days, apparently unmindful that trouble with the police might have driven François from Paris, and content to take his word that a love-affair had caused his wanderings. But Charles best loved to hear of Guillaume and the House with the Red Door and the community of Saint-Benoît. He could never hear enough, and as François also loved to speak of the home he had lost, the duke said that he had come to know the house in the rue Saint-Jacques as well as François himself and could walk to it without question and greet the canon as a friend.

Otherwise, François had little to do with his time. He feared to visit the town of Blois in case he was recognised as the man wanted in Paris for the robbery at the College of Navarre. Most of his days were spent with Marguerite, whose loving ardour and thirst for knowledge of Paris increased as time passed. Her enthusiasm became an embarrassment to François, who wished to transfer his attentions to other women in the castle, but a change of that sort was difficult in such a small world. Marguerite was jealous, her complaints would cry shrilly in the ears of the duke or his wife, and

he remained faithful to Marguerite, who was pretty and ardent enough to satisfy any man.

So that François had at last found the comfortable life and the safe shelter for which he had hankered. He would find no better hiding-place in the whole of France, a covert so good that he could forget he was a fugitive. There was nothing to stop him settling down for the rest of his days at Blois and the duke would give him whatever he asked: money, a house, or a wife. And yet, nine months after his arrival at Blois, in the late summer of 1458, François again stood before the duke Charles, trying to explain how it came about that he had decided to abandon his pleasant room in the castle. It was almost upon impulse that he had entered the duke's study and all he could do was to stand muttering of the happiness he had found at Blois and how he appreciated the duke's kindness.

"Sit down, François," said the duke, "and tell me what you have come to say."

"I hardly know how to say what is in my mind," said François.

"What, François Villon at a loss for words!" cried Charles.

"Hesitant and tongue-tied as a bride before the bridegroom," said François, "but when I speak to you, sir, I feel that you know what I'm going to say and so maybe your understanding can cover the gaps in my explanation. All I can say is that, although I have been happy with you, and was thankful to gain the security of your home, my life here has become a strain on me. But I can't explain my reasons, they are inexplicable to myself, and so all I can say is that I must go."

François wondered if Charles would take the news badly, but the duke said how sorry he would be to lose his new-found friend and that the months since his arrival had passed like weeks.

"Your company has restored to my old age some of the vitality of youth," cried the duke, "and I am so desolate at thought of your going that I do not scruple to use an argument I know to be unworthy. Have you considered how you'll live away from Blois, François, or forgotten the hardships endured on the road in the year of your wanderings?"

"The hardships have not been forgotten," answered François, "but I know my way about. That year taught me a lot and I shall get along now that I've had this rest at Blois. And whatever happens to me, I shall at least be free to do as I like."

"That is the trouble, I know," said the duke. "Restriction of any kind, even the pleasant restriction of a comfortable daily routine, becomes a fret on your spirit. I ought to have known better than to expect a man's nature could be changed by the bribes of security and comfort, at least a man of your sort."

"And yet, sir, I have praised and thirsted after rich living all my life, and now that it comes I am turning away——"

"Causing bewilderment in your own mind," interjected Charles. "But all along I have realised your difference from these other men who live with me. Many times they have come to me with tales of François Villon, complaining that their dignity was lowered by this new favourite of mine who openly preferred the company of servants to their own. With distaste and horror, they spoke of the man who was often to be seen with the maids or, what was worse, playing cards and dice with the gardeners and scullions. I knew what they did not understand: that your instinct rightly leads you to such people because they are alive and natural in their living, whilst these poets of mine lead a life against nature, if life it can be called. But I have surrounded myself with their artificialities for too many years and I cannot do without them. For you, it is different. You are young, François. Love-affairs and youthful indiscretions are soon forgotten and you will find your way back to Paris. Only the other week I said to my wife that one fine day, when the sun was shining, we should be seeing the last of François Villon. A young man of twenty-seven, and especially a man of his temperament, will not be staying long in one place: so I said, and both of us hoped I might be wrong. Your company and the tales of Paris will be much missed, but I will not try to delay the inevitable. All I will ask, François, is that you will keep out of danger as much as you can. Restrain your impulses. We should all be much grieved were anything to go wrong with you and I fear there is that in you which will make life hazardous."

And the duke then spoke of the subject nearest his heart: poetry: and then it appeared that he was feeling his way uncomfortably, speaking of the theory of poetry when another thought was in his mind, until François cut across his discourse to say that he had always been impatient of theories.

"That brings us to the general outlook on poetry in this castle," he said. "The others here look on poetry as a kind of gentlemanly diversion and a dexterous sort of game in which one must try to outrival the other's sleight-of-hand. It's a conjuring trick with them, sir, a game of tennis with words played according to the proper rules, but it's a game I can't understand. I've always written because I've wanted to write and because I've enjoyed writing, without theories on the matter."

"I am glad you've said that," answered the duke, "for I was just going on to speak of your poetry. I have never told you my full opinion of your quality as a poet and I would say that I and most men must have their theories of writing. Theories of writing are

perhaps necessary to men of talent but they are useless to men of genius, so much wasted lumber. And you do well not to bother your head about theories, François, for you are one of the men of genius and do not need them. Your genius is greater by far than my own."

François was taken aback by this wild statement and, laughing uneasily, said that his master was joking. "That is a fine remark, sir, for you are the poet men call the greatest of the age."

"You should know that this is never a matter for joking with me, but my life's work," answered Charles. "What I have said is true. Perhaps I was the greatest poet of the age, but all I will say about my talent is that it is sufficient to recognise a greater. Posterity will perhaps remember Charles of Orléans, the prince who dabbled in graceful verses, the royal amateur, but the work of François Villon will come to mean more and his work will be read centuries after it is written, read and remembered and loved. I do not speak so much of what you have so far written but of what you will come to write, God willing, and to which the other is a signpost. You will bring a new thing to the literature of France, the quality of reality. Apart from our differing talents, my life has driven me to seek refuge in unreality whilst yours has driven you from unreality to reality. I am glad to have had the chance to acknowledge this genius, and I have already seen the foolishness of my request a moment ago that you should take care of yourself so that no harm may befall you. Your life here in Blois is stifling your talents, the sign being that no poem has come from you since that first one and, danger or no danger, your destiny must be followed. Out of it will come a bright flower of poetry, even if it flowers from the gibbet."

François thought this a mad prophecy. The talk must be brought down to earth, and he said that the duke had been too kind and cared for a good-for-nothing too well. "That was what they called me in Paris and they were right," said François. "I can't even repay the men who are kind to me. The proper thing to do would be to stay on here to please you and yet somehow I know I can't do that."

"Do not think of it," said Charles, "and forget any kindness you think you have received here. And when would you be thinking of leaving Blois?"

"I had not thought of that, sir, but to-morrow seems as good a day as another."

"Now that you have made up your mind, it would be a mistake to delay," said Charles. "A day will give you time for your good-byes and, if you wish, we will take our last walk together through the estate this afternoon. It is a lovely summer's day and I would

have you remember Blois when it is at its best, with the sun shining on the still green fields and trees and hardly a shadow of the coming winter to be seen."

Next day, the duke walked with François on his way out of the castle, saying how pleased his uncle would be to see him and advising him to make for Orléans and thence move straight on to Paris. "Your uncle will have forgotten any resentment he may have had and will be delighted to see you after this absence of nearly two years," said Charles.

There was no reason to warn the duke of his greater need to avoid Paris and François said that he would certainly follow his advice. The two walked in silence until the duke asked François if he had said good-bye to all his friends in the castle.

"Yes, sir," François answered. "I don't think one was forgotten and I even made efforts to say good-bye to the poets, thinking that I might as well leave them civilly, but they would have none of it, indicating that they were pleased to see that the duke had come to his senses at last and sent me away in disgrace."

"What would they say if they knew it was you turned your back on Blois?" said Charles. "You needn't have expected any greatness of spirit from these men, but I expect you had farewells enough from the rest to make up for their coldness, Marguerite especially being inconsolable. My wife will have many complaints to make of her maid's inattention and day-dreaming, I'll be bound, for the girl's mind will be outside Blois, following the poet from the great town who told her of so many wonderful things to bring variety into her life and then left her voluntarily for the road."

"She thinks I'm mad," said François, "and perhaps she is right. But let's not talk of Marguerite these last few moments, sir. I have a small parting present for you, one that ill compares with the purse full of gold you have given me. It is an inconsiderable poem I wrote last evening. The conversation we had was running in my head. I kept asking myself why I was leaving Blois and found the question insoluble. From that, I went on to consider myself as I often used to do and decided I was the last man in the world to understand myself. Thence came the refrain of the poem. It's a slight affair but I hope you will accept it as a reminder of me, sir."

"No reminder of you will be necessary," said Charles, "but you know it is the token I would best have from you. It also proves that your decision to leave Blois is a wise one. Your pen moves again as soon as you feel you are free. I shall keep this manuscript to myself, my own personal property. And now, François, I must turn back, for the castle is out of sight."

The two men, an ill-assorted pair, stared helplessly at each other,

regretting the fate that drove them apart, but the duke, as if knowing what was in his mind, said that François must keep to his purpose and, with a hurried blessing, sent him on his way. A bend of the road soon hid him from view and François last saw his friend standing in the road, the poem clutched in his hand, his grey hair blown carelessly by the wind.

CHAPTER VI

BUT that was no day to be remembering the sadness of farewells, and as François walked along the country lanes towards Orléans, with his pedlar's pack once again on his back, his regret was soon forgotten, obscured by his elation and relief at bursting out of Blois. The duke had given him a heavy purse of gold as a parting present and, thinking of the freedom this should ensure for many months, François even found pleasure in the sight of the green fields and trees. The larks bursting with their song sounded more pleasant to his ear than birds had ever sounded before and the dusty road beneath his feet was not a trouble to him at all, for weren't his shoes and his clothes brand-new? And as he walked along he raised his own voice in song, singing lewd songs of the Paris streets to give vent to his feelings, regretting that he had not seen a soul to talk with although he had walked a long way from Blois and was then well on the road to Orléans.

But his songs were soon after interrupted by the sound of hooves behind and François saw that a man had pulled his horse and cart up and was offering him a lift. He jumped into the cart eagerly, saying that a lift in the direction of Orléans would be most welcome.

"Although in fact I don't much care if you're not going to Orléans," cried François, "for the whole of France is my property."

"I'm heading for Orléans," answered the man. He was a short rotund man, with a round face burned red by the sun so that it looked like one of the apples he was carrying in his cart. A typical farmer, François decided, and his judgment was confirmed by the man, who told him that he was taking his own apples to market at Orléans.

"This season has been a good season for apples," he said. "These here are some of the best I have ever had from my trees, but all the farmers round about are in the same boat and in consequence the apples don't fetch half the price they would in a bad year. The life of us farmers is a hard one and gets worse each season, and I'm

beginning to think it better to work for another man and let him take all the risk whilst you sit back and draw your fixed wage."

But the hardness of his life did not appear to have affected his temper and he told François to put his teeth in some of these apples to try their excellence. François was glad to have found an audience and he chattered of his past life and spoke of the days when he was intended for the priesthood.

"I knew you did not come from these parts when I heard your songs," said the farmer, "and it was my curious nature made me offer you a lift, for a man never gets the chance to hear about other towns in the foreign parts of France."

"Talking of chances, I was telling you how I threw away my chance of a priesthood and it always has been the same with me," said François. "I have just thrown away a comfortable lodging with the Duke of Orléans."

"You've thrown away a living in the duke's castle, you say!" cried the farmer. "Why, you can't be right sharp!"

"That's what a woman of mine told me," answered François. "It is true that I lived a life of ducal luxury and thought no more of it than you do of your apples. To tell truth, I am not sorry to be away from the place for I was choking after a few months, and it was the same with me in Paris. I shall tell you it was a damned bitch of a woman who caused my downfall but I know that I should have gone to the taverns and debauchery even if I'd never set eyes on her. But, apart from the misfortune of knowing that bitch, there's no constancy in me. I can't stand routine, not even the drinking of a glass of beer or something pleasant."

"You've got to put up with routine or else you'll go under," interjected the farmer. "We've all of us wanted to get away at times but have had to give up wild ideas."

"You're one of the wise ones, farmer," said François, "but it's not in me to act in that way. It was the routine of duty that broke me."

And he told the farmer of Margot and all his friends in Paris, loving the sound of his own voice, spreading himself and basking in the countryman's admiration. They became great friends on their leisurely journey towards Orléans, and in the evening François entertained his new friend with readings from his poetry.

So finally they came within sight of Orléans, and they had been drinking a strong home-made wine that the farmer carried with him and were pretty well fuddled. François would not go into Orléans in case the police were on the watch for him but he proposed to buy farewell drinks at an inn outside the town. The farmer was agreeable to this and they prepared to make themselves comfortable for

the evening. As they sat at the table the farmer suddenly cried out: "Keep yourself away from women and you're safe."

"Amen to that," said François. "I swear I'll never touch another woman again for a woman is the devil himself."

"I swear that, too," cried the farmer, "for if you do, you're done for."

So went the refrain of their conversation, and they kept themselves to themselves in accordance with their new resolution, playing dice as best they could and ignoring the advances of the women in the tavern.

"I'd like to go on drinking in this place for a year," said François.

"Without women, my boy," muttered the farmer, "without women."

A woman who was sitting by herself crossed over to them at this and sat herself down by François.

"All women are not after your money," she said.

"If they don't want that, then they're after something else."

"Maybe that's true," she said, "but what I'm after is only a little thing to you. I hear by your accent that you're a Parisian. Now I'm a woman who has always hankered after travel but I've been stuck here in Orléans all my life, too busy making money to travel. I'd like to join you in drinks and hear from your own lips all about Paris and your adventures."

The woman was fat and unattractive, but before François had time to answer, the landlord, who was then serving him with wine, bent down and whispered in his ear that this was a woman worth knowing, for she was the wife of a rich butcher in Orléans. "If she is going to buy you drinks," said the landlord, "let her do so. She has never been so free with her money before."

But François would not let him finish and said that he didn't care who she was. "The Duke of Orléans, with all his money, could not detain me," cried François. "He offered me ten thousand gold crowns if I'd stay with him only another year. Is it likely that I'll take notice of a greasy butcher's wife because she stands me a drink?"

The landlord shrugged his shoulders and moved away, but the woman did not appear to resent this rudeness and François, with his friend the farmer, ignored her, and indeed came to forget that she was there. All they knew was that wine was brought, although they did not order it themselves, and finally the farmer fell insensible across the table with his head in the dregs of wine.

"This drunken fool is in no condition to drive you," said the woman. "I have my own cart outside and will take you into Orléans and also give you a lodging for the night."

François roused himself at the sound of her voice and, as he felt the warmth of her body pressed at his side, his fuddled brain imagined that it was Margot sitting there. "Margot, you've found me then," he muttered.

"My name's not Margot," said the woman, "but I can see you're not in a fit state to make out the difference between Margot and Jeanne to-night. That suits my purpose, which I'll explain to you now. I have just been to see my husband off on a journey, and coming in here for a drink I fell to thinking of my loneliness, as I'm a woman with a liking to be kept warm at nights, and as soon as I saw you, and heard your talk, I made up my mind I'd carry you off home to take my husband's place in bed."

François was not so far gone as to misunderstand this but he was becoming maudlin, overcome with self-pity, wine, and thought of Margot far away in Paris, so that he finally agreed to the proposal.

"Why not?" he said. "I'm fit to take the places of a dozen husbands to-night one after the other, and I'll imagine I'm with Margot again."

"Imagine what you like so long as you come," answered the woman. "I've taken a rare fancy to you and I've never known a Parisian before."

The farmer was in no condition to say good-bye and, passing his hand over the man's head in farewell, François allowed the woman to lead him outside to her cart and they were soon driving at a fast pace towards the town. The woman did not speak another word but gave all her attention to the horse: trees and hedges seemed to rush past, and even the tipsy François was conscious of the strangeness of this journey and the lodging to which he was being taken with such little ceremony. Had this woman got wind of his purse full of gold crowns and was he walking into a trap? He knew it was not wise to go into Orléans, although he trusted that the gathering darkness would be sufficient cover. The ride in the night air cleared his mind. When they reached the town he was ready for instant flight and kept very quiet whilst the cart was examined at the gate, but the woman's house was just inside the walls of the town and they reached it safely.

The butcher's wife led him straight to her bedroom, pausing only to snatch up a bottle of wine, and the wine rekindling imagination François was almost able to persuade himself that it was Margot he held in his arms, but the woman was more gross in her love-making than Margot had ever been. Her eagerness nauseated him, and as soon as possible he slipped out of her embrace and feigned sleep, keeping still whilst she shook and fondled him in her

impatience until, tired and overcome with wine, he did in fact lose consciousness.

It was early morning when he awoke with a splitting headache and, turning restlessly on his side, he saw the woman who had taken him to her bed and realised that once again he had fallen to his besetting weakness and just as easily as of old. Ruefully he remembered the drunken farmer's dictum: Keep yourself away from women or else you're done for. The words were spoken by a man in his cups but the wine had spoken with a fatal significance. Women will be the death of me, he thought.

He lay staring at the woman stretched out by his side in her drunken, nameless sleep, with the pale moonlight showing all her ugliness. How he hated the bedraggled, lank hair; the fat sagging teats; the curves of the body fallen into a decay which so hollowly mocked his memories of Margot; the animal breath which was drawn in gulping, uncertain snores and, above all, he hated the pluffed, sweating, hairy legs as they sprawled over his own. Roughly he pushed them away and, feeling the need for fresh air, got up from the bed and crossed to the window.

He stood staring out across the narrow street which brought memories of the streets in Paris, but his thoughts could not be taken long from the woman snoring behind him on the bed: a woman who, in her grossness, was symbolic to him of all women save Margot, the tavern-keeper, who was redeemed by the unselfishness of her love. And reviewing all the women he had known, François was disgusted with them and himself. Following the thread of his own life, he saw that he was a man who rightly should have been left alone. There were times when he loved solitude and those were the times, the few times, when he was himself. It was not as he imagined: the true Villon did not need to laugh with the mob and seek distraction in worthless company. Those were the times he had denied his right self and only in his occasional moodiness had he looked for truth. But women could not leave him be. They flaunted their bodies before him so that he forgot his reason and thought only to run after them.

His meditation was broken by a move and restless heave of the body from the woman on the bed. Coming to himself, François saw that the morning light was showing over the houses and that it was time to be gone. He thought of his future indeterminate wanderings and remembered that the duke's money would not last for ever, especially if he fell so easily to the temptation of women. The woman had said that her husband was a master butcher and the landlord of the inn had said that she was rich. He realised that if he could find money in the house she would not be able to denounce

him as the thief without confessing that she took a man she met in a tavern to fill her husband's bed.

The idea was good if only money could be found, and invoking Colin's spirit, wondering if he was alive or hanging, François searched the room and, in an old chest, discovered a hundred gold crowns in a bag, stuffed under a lot of rubbish. He had not expected to find such a large amount of money but the butcher and his wife were not the sort to trust strong rooms, preferring to hide their money safe at hand. It was a habit that would just about break their hearts, for they were not likely to stand the loss of money easily. And as he took a last look at the woman he told himself that he deserved a stud fee for sleeping with such a fat, self-satisfied, purse-proud hag and he slipped through a window into the street, congratulating himself that this robbery would never be brought home to him, although it might be wise to keep away from Orléans for a time in case the woman's early anger ran away with her discretion.

CHAPTER VII

THE town of Orléans, with the great scrubs of forest surrounding it, was not seen again by François in eighteen months, and he wandered on here and there for hundreds of miles, aimlessly following the bend of the river so far as Moulins and Roussillon in the south, avoiding the large towns as much as he could, clutching hold of his money desperately and scraping together a bare livelihood by the reading of his poetry or the sale of finery for women and relics of the saints. But the spring of 1460 found him again near Orléans on his way back to Paris. He had determined to ask Guillaume if his exile of three years was not sufficient penance, and if not, let the authorities take and hang him, for that was to be preferred to the life he was living.

With a definite purpose in mind, François was happier than he had been since leaving Paris. Characteristically, he had decided, with no good reason, that the Church would by now be ready to forgive his sacrilegious raid on their gold and receive him into the fold again, maybe imposing some trifling penance as a matter of form. This hope was in his mind as he came into sight of Orléans and he was as good as back in the rue Saint-Jacques, going cheerfully from tavern to tavern, leaving the score of his drinks to be chalked up on the door. Thought of Parisian taverns made him

remember the dust of the road and his parched throat. A drink would go down well for he had walked twenty miles since dawn, so eager was he to be on his way now that he had persuaded hope to return. A woman too would not be amiss, and he remembered the gold given him by the Duke of Bourbon for a poem composed in the duke's honour: money that had been carefully hidden against necessity. But he had so convinced himself that he would soon be back in Paris that it appeared useless to save all the money, some could be spared to buy a woman and drinks, and, taking his knife, François slit his clothes and spilled five of the gold crowns into his purse. And as he hurried towards Orléans he thought of the butcher's wife and the money he had stolen, but it was not to be imagined that she would give herself away by denouncing the thief after eighteen months to get used to the loss of her money, even if she remembered his face.

It was late afternoon when François reached the town and, hurrying to the nearest tavern, he ordered drink and asked the landlord to let him see a woman worth sleeping with. "I've been in the country on business out of the way of women," he said, "so make sure you send me one of your best."

"I don't know what business you've had in the country," answered the landlord, "but it doesn't appear to have brought you much money. The women here don't sleep with strangers for the novelty or even their good looks."

But the gold François showed soon changed his tone and, muttering apologies, he hurried away and sent a pretty, blonde girl to François.

"I'm told you want somebody to keep you company for the night," she said.

"That's as may be," answered François. "Sit down and drink."

"An invitation I never refuse," the girl said. And she busied herself with the wine, making no effort to hold him in talk. But her small plump body pressed close to his side excited him: she was the type he best loved and eagerly he bargained with her, offering a gold crown for her company.

"Make it two crowns," she said, "and I'm with you."

"Two crowns!" cried François. "That's a lot of money. I'm not so careless of my money as I was."

"I'm known as Macée of Orléans," said the girl, "and anybody here will tell you that I'll give you a good time. I'll sleep without clothes if that be your desire and you'll be safe in my house, which is a superior place near the market."

"I'll come, let's be going," said François.

"Just a moment," said Macée. "Let's see the colour of your money."

And, grumbling, François was forced to undo his belt and show Macée the money in his purse.

"Two gold crowns and more!" said Macée. "You'll excuse me asking but a girl has to be careful. I can see you are a gentleman. It was my impulse to trust you at sight and only habit made me ask to see your money. And now let's be off, if you are in such a hurry."

The house was a well-furnished house above the ordinary run of such houses. Her room was on the ground floor, warm and carpeted. The woman too was ardent, reminding François of Marguerite, the girl he had known in the castle at Blois, and as he dropped off to sleep, his last thought was that he had spent his money well.

But in the morning, happening to wake early, he found his bed companion gone from his side and, staring about him, he made out her figure crouched over his clothes at the end of the bed, doubtless searching for his purse. Jumping from the bed, he snatched his clothes out of her hand. She started to scream at the top of her voice. The house was roused and, blocking the door with a chair, François slipped into his clothes and, holding the girl off with his dagger, he opened the window and jumped into the street just as the door burst open under the blows of the brothel-keeper and his assistants. He took to his heels, expecting at the least that a chamber-pot would be flung at his head, but he was allowed to go freely and, pausing at the street corner, he put himself to rights.

But as he brushed the hair out of his eyes, and pulled his clothes straight, he found that his purse had gone and understood why they had left him alone. And, muttering curses, he made for the gates, resolved to get away from the town and make straight for Paris, looking neither to the right or left for any woman, be she beautiful as the Lady Flora.

He reached the market-place, which was deserted save for the early morning buyers of fish and meat and vegetables, and was slinking quietly through the crowd of them, with eyes on the ground, as had become his habit, when the bids going on were suddenly stopped by a tremendous shout and, raising his head, François saw the butcher's wife he had forgotten, shaking her fists at him and crying that there was the rascally thief she had been telling them about, the man who had repaid her kindness by stealing her gold crowns.

"I'll have the law of him for that," she howled. "You'll see him swinging from a gibbet."

"The woman's mad," cried François. "I'm a stranger to Orléans and only came in late yesterday. Let me pass."

But they were too many for him and held him struggling impotently whilst they sent for the watch. And he soon ceased his useless struggles and took an opportunity to whisper in the woman's ear that she was a fool to give him up.

"What will your husband say when I tell them that you took me home to sleep with as soon as his back was turned and gave me his money as a parting gift? He'll surely turn you away."

But the woman answered that her husband was dead or else she would have had to keep her tongue between her teeth. "He was killed by the plague and I never saw him alive again after he left this town," she said. "Ah, a lean and cunning one you are. I thought that was in your mind, but you've been a little too cunning this time. The unexpected has let you down with a bump and there's a still bigger fall coming, let me say. You'd better give up the money or else you'll find yourself swinging from a rope's end. I have no wish to be hard, and if you pay up I'll have you to live with me. You're an amusing rascal, I should imagine, but my money I do mean to have back if I can."

François gave up hope at this and made no resistance when the guards carted him off to prison, feeling that this was indeed the end of his wanderings. And when the preliminary examination was over, and he in his cell, he flung himself face down to sleep on his pallet, thinking that at least there was straw in his cell and that he need not wonder where the next meal was coming from.

He was awakened by the key turning in his door and the gaoler come to ask if there was anything he could do for him, any message to take, or perhaps he had the money to pay for a better cell.

"All the money I had you saw them take away," said François.

"Some of the men who come here have ways of hiding their money," said the gaoler.

"Well, I've no more," said François: and he spoke bitterly of his ill-luck. "Had the fool of a husband clung to life only eighteen months longer I should have been safe," he cried. "Clapped into gaol because a butcher catches the plague! I must have been born under Saturn, for everything goes wrong with me."

The gaoler listened to his complaints philosophically, but he was a broad-shouldered, good-natured fellow, seeming to take kindly to François, and he fetched a glass of wine for his prisoner, although that was against the regulations, and, closing the door behind him, stretched out on the bed and told François to talk his fill.

"I can see that you are full of your troubles," he said, "and as I've got an hour to spare, talk away. I find it does a man good to get

these matters off his chest and makes him a more contented prisoner. What's more, I like to hear these stories the prisoners tell me, true or false. They make excellent hearing as a rule and many is the droll tale I've heard in this room."

"There's not much worth the hearing in my case," answered François. "I dare say I could keep you amused with tales of Paris, or even of the time I spent in the duke's castle at Blois, but it is not in my mind to speak of these things now. The last eighteen months of my life have been so miserable that all happier memories are forgotten. It is a relief to have anybody to speak to and I might say that it is almost a relief to be in prison. The loneliness was, I can tell you, the worst part of my sufferings. It is over four years since I was driven from Paris, and during those years of my solitary wanderings a morbid and ever-increasing sense of aloneness has been with me. To tramp about aimlessly and hopelessly in all weathers, driven here and there by fear, would be bad enough for any man, but such a fate is especially crushing to a man like me, for I am one who must talk and have life around me. I have always had a morbid dread of being left alone, so you can perhaps understand how these many months of lonely drifting became an increasing agony to me. Did I forget myself and my fate in a girl's caress, or in a tavern, a chance word of the police or a shadow across the door was enough to make me tremble and fly for my life."

"I can understand that, mate," said the gaoler. "Many a prisoner has told me the same thing."

"None of them could have suffered so much as I have done," said François. "None of them had so much to live for. I have all I want in Paris. I am famous there as a poet, and have a good woman and a tavern which I could make the most prosperous in the town, but I dare not go back. One of my friends has already suffered the rope. My loneliness was made more intense by the companions I met and lost each day. Happy men and women there were but none were interested in me or my misery for long. My come-by-chance mates were thieves, drunken men-at-arms looking for gold to steal or women to rape, minstrels, unfrocked priests, poor scholars tramping to the schools at Montpellier or Orléans, beggars, unemployed labourers, fortune-tellers, strolling mummers, jugglers, and showmen: all these have I bedded with, the motley collection of rascals you know so well. But I am different from these, I tell you, for I am a clerk, a graduate of the University of Paris, and a poet. I rested in many places. Each night I never knew where the next was to be spent and came not to care if my lodging was the municipal doss-house, the dirty stinking communal

room of a beer-house, a prostitute's chamber, a haystack, or the hedge. So long as I was warm, and the fleas not too active, I gave thanks to God and counted myself lucky. I need not tell you how I was drenched to the skin by the rain, how I shivered in the snow, how I shrivelled up in the heat of the summer sun, how the clothes rotted on my body, how I was reduced to beg for food: all this you have heard many times and are become a connoisseur of the sufferings of others. But what sticks in my mind is the sense of destiny that hung over me the whole time. I ran helter-skelter from the police, from the sight of a clerical gown, from footpads, from a curious-seeming glance in a tavern, from a rumour of archers. I was scared of my own shadow. I clung miserably to my life. Yet there was hanging over me the sense of impending doom, the instinct that no matter how I twisted and turned my fate was to wander on and on until I was caught, and then the birds would be pecking at my eyes."

"Unpleasant thoughts to keep you company at night, mate!"

"You're right," answered François. "Why, it's a wonder I haven't gone mad, and I can tell you that at times I have envied the peasant his quiet, orderly, and uneventful life. I can remember one Sunday evening of last summer in particular when, after tramping all day in the dust trying to sell my wretched merchandise, I came to a village where the bells were calling the people to church and idly I sat on a tombstone to watch them walking up the road and into church. They were careful, neat plodders, such a contrast to the hapless vagabond on the tombstone. Their little lives were lived for ever, father and son, in the one place with never an unexpected event to disturb the pool of their existence. And so wretched was I, with the dust in my hair and the shoes falling off my feet and no hope in life, without a single friend to cheer me on my way, that I fell to thinking that maybe the solution to life is after all six days of hard work and then a routine of churchgoing on the seventh. A life lived in frugal straitness so that the reward of happiness may be earned in some future world. I saw innocent country wenches and imagined myself married to one of them, living peacefully in a cottage near the church, and I tell you I was so full of self-pity that I almost persuaded myself that there my days could be dreamed away. And then I remembered the sameness of one day to the next, and I also realised how flat it would be if things turned out as the priests say, if there is a future heaven and hell with the sheep divided from the goats: unending torture and unending bliss. Such perfection of existence would soon become tiring in heaven or earth. Even those placid countrymen would jib at a perfect life and want to spit on the floor, and as for my own

friends, if any got to heaven by some mistake, they'd soon be crying out for dice. I knew in that moment that my salvation or consolation was not to be found apart from myself. I could not live as these others lived, no matter how wretched I was. And as I turned away my eye caught the inscription on a near-by tomb, as strange an epitaph as ever man had. For it sang the praises of one called Michel, and it praised not his wisdom or his wealth or his piety or his learning, but his strength in love, mentioning the large number of girls he had put on their backs in his time."

"You're joking," said the gaoler.

"As true as I'm in prison," answered François, "and somehow sight of that epitaph cheered me on my way. Even in that village some men were different from the rest, and the pious had a sneaking regard for a rascal who managed to break the monotony of their lives and give them something to talk about. But such interludes were rare and, in all this time of misery, the only consolation I found was in my own poetry. I have told you that I am reckoned a poet in Paris. To you that is only a word, and to me at one time it was little more, but the longer I tramped the more I turned to the cultivation of this one talent, no matter where I found myself. I came to be so absorbed in my poetry that I was like the girl, Jeanne, burned by the English in the year I was born. It was as if I was listening to voices that only I could hear, and I was able to sit in a noisy tavern with my senses alert for danger and yet write or think on my poetry. I was always composing, no matter whether I was in a tavern or a harlot's bed. I was never without writing materials and I wrote on every subject under the sun, except the countryside. The poems were read to any audience I fancied; sometimes in a tavern or market-place, even in the drawing-room of some fine lady devoted to the arts; but I didn't much care whether they were liked or not. My pleasure was in the writing. I came to prefer the flavour of my poetry even to that of wine. As time passed, I was increasingly in this mood, and my poetry, besides helping me earn my living, became my chief hold on life, preserving sanity in my loneliness. But I see my poetry does not interest you, such talk is Greek to a gaoler."

"Well, mate, you're quite right, if the truth must be spoken," said the gaoler. "Such stuff has always seemed unnatural to my way of thinking, but I will say that, although I've known a man come in here and tell me a tale with more spice to it, I've never known a man speak so well. You've got a good gift of the gab. It's a pity you'll soon lose the chance of an audience."

"How's that?" cried François.

"Well, if I were you, mate, I shouldn't hope for much. Be

prepared for the worst and it won't come so hard, if you take my meaning."

"You're trying to say that I have come to the end of my journeying and they're going to hang me," muttered François.

"That's about the size of it," said the gaoler. "You must never forget that the money, or a part of it, was found on you, hidden in the lining of your clothes."

"And how do they know they're the same gold crowns?" said François. "And couldn't I have come by them honestly?"

"Not a scallywag of your sorts," answered the gaoler. "At least, they choose to believe so, and quite reasonably too in my opinion. But no matter what evidence you bring it won't do you much good. This widow has influence in the town and means to get her money or her revenge. There's nothing upsets that sort so much as the loss of money."

"But I'm a clerk, a graduate of the University of Paris," said François, "and these civil courts, as I told them, haven't the right to try me at all. I am answerable only to the Church authorities in Paris."

"Oh, as to that, my boy, they deny that you are a clerk, and that's no wonder either. You haven't even got a tonsure."

"And how do you think I'd be sparing the pennies all these years to be paying the barber?" answered François. "They need only go to Paris and they'll find I'm speaking the truth. Now in Paris I have influence——"

"If you have, then now is the time to use it," said the gaoler. And stretching himself, saying that his wife would have a meal ready for him by that time and would only get to nagging if kept waiting, the gaoler left the cell, slamming the heavy door behind him, and François was again left to himself: to the silence he knew so well and the meditation of his probable fate.

CHAPTER VIII

FRANÇOIS gave himself up for lost, but a few days later the door of his cell was flung open and, crouched on his stool, he looked up to find his gaoler in the doorway.

"Come on," the man cried. "You are free and won't have to keep your appointment with the hangman this time."

François stared blankly at the man, uncomprehending, and said that he might leave him free in his last hours.

"You can get on your way as soon as you like, I said." And wasting no more words, saying he had many other cells to visit, he seized François by the arm and dragged him outside.

"So I've cheated the hangman after all," François said.

"Yes, thanks to Charles, Duke of Orléans, or perhaps the praise should go to his young daughter," answered the gaoler.

"Marie, the girl who was born soon after my arrival at Blois," said François.

"Her name is Marie, and as she is visiting this town of Orléans, the chief town of her father's country, for the first time in her life, all the prisons are flung open."

"That's twice he has saved my life," muttered François, "but this time it's difficult to thank him for the gift."

"You'll get over that feeling when you're outside and drinking wine, with a girl on your knee," said the gaoler.

But as François went out at the gates with the other released prisoners, all leaping and shouting for joy, he was the only quiet one amongst them. Dazedly he watched their antics, feeling himself a spirit from another world, and began to ponder his future. Here he was once more snatched needlessly from death. What was he to do? And all he knew was that his urge to go back to Paris had left him. The shadow of the rope had destroyed his confidence and he felt that death would be certain if he returned so soon after his release from Orléans, for the authorities might have sent on news to Paris of his offence and fortunate release.

Money was as usual the first consideration. His purse was empty and, thinking of his protector Charles, now in Orléans, he decided to write a poem in honour of the baby princess. Stretching himself lazily in the sun, he reached for his pedlar's pack, and walked on until he came to an inn, where he bought ink and paper and wearily scribbled the poem, trying to express the joy he did not feel at his deliverance. The poem, he knew, was poor: long-winded and insincere, stuffed full of Latin tags to cover the poverty of his own invention.

Outside the tavern, he found an honest-looking boy to carry his poem to the duke, whose lodging would be easily found, and explained that the boy was to use the name of Villon as the key to an audience with the duke. And, waiting for the boy's return, François tried to persuade himself that some innate sense of decency kept him from going to see the duke himself. But he knew the real reason was that, if he went, the duke would again offer him shelter at Blois and his disinclination to accept the refuge even then would be most difficult to explain.

His messenger came running back within the hour, a sealed

packet in his hand, and inside was a purse of gold crowns with a note from the duke expressing sorrow that François should have fallen on evil times and offering him his old post at Blois. The duke was as persistent in his kindness as Guillaume, but François sat down and wrote a short note of thanks, saying that he was going back to his uncle in Paris, and giving the boy money he told him to seek out the duke once more and deliver the answer.

For the time being, he was still unsettled and, drifting through the streets of Orléans, he cursed the crowds of people out for merry-making. He was not in tune with their mood and, with the feeling upon him that a man raised from the dead would stumble helplessly as he was stumbling, he made for the wharves and the quietness of the river. A ship was there, making ready for its journey down the river to Nantes, the crew busy hauling ropes and carrying water. Acting upon impulse, thinking that he must escape Orléans with its crowds of jubilant holiday-makers, François sought out the skipper and asked if there was room for a passenger in his ship.

"We could find room for a man able to pay his own passage," said the skipper, "and if you are in a hurry to reach Nantes, then you have chosen the right man. My boat is the fastest out of Orléans."

"I'm in no hurry," said François, "and shall probably leave the vessel before you are tied to the quay at Nantes."

A bargain was soon struck and the skipper showed François where he could rest on the deck out of the way of the busy crew until the ship sailed.

Life on the river was much to his liking, because he had no work to do and nothing to worry him. All day long he used to laze on his back in the sun, watching the crossed sails above his head or the herons trailing their way above the reeds. For the first time since he left Angers (save during his stay at Blois) he was not looking fearfully over his shoulder at every sound, for there was no sound save the flap of sails, the creak of the mast, the gentle splash of the water, and the low cries of the crew as they called to each other whilst going about their daily tasks.

This peaceful life could not last long. François did not dare go into a large town like Nantes and, asking the skipper to put him ashore well before that town was sighted, he decided to strike across country westwards. He might as well have a look at that sea the sailors had so often described and which he had never seen in his life.

Soon enough, after a few weeks on the roads, misery and his old frightened habits had come back, and by the fall of the year he had crawled no farther than Parthenay. One day, thinking of the hard

winter which was almost come, he reached the village of Saint-Generoux and passed slowly through, tired, cold, and hungry, without a glance to right or left. At the end of the village, and separate from the other houses, he noticed a tiny, clean cottage and wondered if he dare ask for a hot drink. But the disapproving eyes of the housewife as she cautiously opened the door a few inches could not be faced at that moment and, not wishing to spend money in a beer-house, he was passing on, eyes to the ground, when he heard a girl's voice calling Marthe. The voice came from inside the cottage and, turning abruptly, he saw that it was addressed to a girl who stood in the garden watching his slow progress down the road. She was young and pretty; restless too under his scrutiny, and suddenly she asked what he was staring at.

"I heard your name called," muttered François, "and remembered another Marthe I knew."

"Was this Marthe young and beautiful?" asked the girl.

But before he could answer, the door of the cottage was flung open, and another girl stood on the step, crying out that Marthe was to have nothing to do with such a scarecrow of a man. "Only the other day I heard that a woman the opposite end of the village was beaten and robbed by a man they haven't caught yet——"

"This is my elder sister, Yvonne," interjected Marthe, "and because we have no father or mother, she imagines she can order me about."

And turning to Yvonne, Marthe called her a coward. "Aren't there two of us and can't you see the poor fellow is tired and cold and almost at the end of his tether, with the next village miles away? You're welcome to come inside for something hot, and a warm by the fire, if you're so inclined. Take no notice of my sister."

François thanked her and, assuring them there was nothing to be feared from him, he went into the cottage, where they gave him a hot bowl of steaming broth.

"Well, there's no doubt you were hungry," said Marthe, "and now the edge has been taken off your hunger I will remind you that my question stays unanswered. Was this Marthe pretty?"

"I was thinking of my uncle's servant in Paris," he said.

"Do you mean to say you've come all the way from Paris, the town everybody longs to visit?"

"Nobody longs to go there more than I," said François. "I carry an image of it in my mind to bear me company on my travels. Even now, I can see the beautiful town built in its own three parts, with the twisting narrow streets and the calm river gliding in their midst and, best of all, I can see the crowded taverns and the square

in front of Notre-Dame when a morality is being played, and the happy crowds swarming the streets on a feast-day, and the Little Bridge which is always lively with the men and women of all nations, and the Holy Innocents' Cemetery, the playground of Paris. Ah, I love every sight and every sound in the town. There can't be such another place in the whole world, and so I told some sailors a little while back who were boasting of England and Spain and Greece."

"It must be fine to see so much life," said Marthe, "and how different from Saint-Generoux! But why don't you go back if you love it so?"

"Yes, that's true!" cried Yvonne. "Why should you be tramping the country with winter coming on and not a roof over your head?"

And François told one of the usual tales he told of his past life: stressing his days in Guillaume's house, his life at the University, and especially his martyrdom to love, an unlucky love that caused the accidental killing of a man and his banishment from Paris. "To obtain the King's pardon," he said, "a penance has been imposed which ordains that I must visit on foot and with little money all the cathedrals in France, bringing back a certificate from each."

"A cruel penance!" cried Marthe. "I should call it an unreasonable penance, and our priest always told us that an unreasonable penance is no penance at all. However, no matter what my sister says, I believe you are a good man, and you're welcome to stay here and rest as long as you like. This village is not our natural home. We were born some miles away, the daughters of a prosperous farmer, attending a convent school, and that is why I was so interested to hear of your poetry and your learning. We may speak with a country accent but have some understanding of these things. We were left orphans about a year ago by a sudden visitation of the plague to our village. It was so fierce that almost the whole village was killed off. Frightened out of our wits, we sought shelter with an aunt who lived in this cottage. Since then, our aunt has died, and we do as well as we can for ourselves. I do a little dressmaking and look after the house whilst my sister works in the fields. There's no luxury to be found here, but what there is, you're welcome to share. We've never had the chance to talk with a poet before. Since our own misfortunes, I can't bear to see others cold and wretched."

"It's a kind offer and most timely," said François. "I was thinking that another winter would probably be the death of me. I have a little money, too, and can help you out with that."

"There, Yvonne, he has some money!" cried Marthe. "There's no need to look so black. And now that's settled, and whilst I am making you up some sort of a bed for the night, tell me more about yourself and your poetry."

"There's nothing to tell," said François. "One day I'll write a poem to the beautiful girl who befriended the ugly Parisian."

"You'll write me a poem, will you?" cried Marthe. "But you've hardly looked at me yet to see whether I be pretty or ugly. You'd best not address the poem to me or you'll have the whole village talking. We shall give you out as a long-lost relative, brother or uncle, and as we are strangers here, nobody will be any the wiser, but if you address poetry to me, and it gets about, then tongues will wag, for brothers or uncles don't write poetry to their relatives."

"I'll put your name in the poem then," said François, "but I'll hide it in acrostic form."

"That's clever of you," said Marthe, "but now I see you're fit for nothing but sleep. The bed is ready and there's no reason why you shouldn't turn in now and get a good night."

"I'll take your advice and be all the fresher for writing poetry in the morning."

And, thanking the sisters, he went into the next room and threw himself on the bed got ready for him in front of the fire, thanking his lucky stars that he had once again chanced on a comfortable place where he could hide in comfort for the winter. It was a home too which showed promise of much amusement. The hours would pass quickly with two women in the house, but he would have to get round the surly one as soon as he could.

The next few days were spent to that end and François did not find it difficult to chase the frowns from Yvonne's face. He told them merry tales of Paris and his friends there, and gave them imitations of the great people he had seen or pretended to have seen, making them laugh so much that the elder forgot her fears and both girls declared that the luckiest day of their lives was the day they had seen François dragging himself along the village road. And François, foreseeing complications, was careful to be on his best behaviour and gave no hint that to sleep alone with two girls in the next room was a sinful waste of opportunity.

But one day, when Yvonne was out, Marthe reminded him that he had not written the poem he had promised. Her eyes sought his in challenge and, saying that was a matter easily remedied, he went into the bedroom and soon wrote down a poem in which he bewailed the cruel girl who would not return his love and left him crying piteously in the wilderness, although time was passing and

she would not remain young for ever. He put her name and his own in the poem in acrostic and called out that the Muse had spoken and she was free to hear the outcome.

"It is beautifully put," said Marthe, "but the despair is misplaced. I don't intend to grow old and dried without having known the love of a man and you don't need to pray for my love. It was yours as soon as I saw you that day in the road and even then I wanted you."

François was unprepared for such a frank avowal. He did not expect to impress a fresh young girl so deeply, and as Marthe got to her feet he regarded her closely, seeming to see her for the first time. The face he saw could not be called exactly pretty. It was perhaps too intelligent for that, but the girl had a fine clear complexion and deep blue eyes set wide apart, the face of a woman capable of self-sacrifice. But François was uneasy in the unexpected success of his poem and muttered that he should have known better than address love poetry to a young girl of eighteen. "You can't be much more than that," he said, "and will one day marry a young farmer who will expect his bride to be as much a virgin as she looks."

"You need have no scruples," she said, "and I didn't imagine you a man who worried over trifles of that sort. There's nothing dainty about us. We're country girls who say and act as we feel."

"But I can give you nothing in exchange," interjected François. "Neither money nor position or even the promise of a constant love. I am a wanderer on the face of the earth and my love is as inconstant as my wanderings."

"I don't ask for anything," cried Marthe. "I'll not try to put bonds upon you but I know you'll stay all winter here in the warm, and all I ask is that you will teach me the delights of love, for a man has never yet unloosed my girdle. I'm not such a fool as to imagine that a man of your sort will stay in these parts for long, and as for the young farmer I am to marry he may never come across me, and you yourself have said that life is passing us by. Even as we stand talking, it passes and is gone and cannot be brought back. See, is not my body worth the seeing and this summer only the nineteenth of my life?"

She had a short plump body with powerful legs, the flesh bulging out above and below her garters, and as they lay on the bed together François noticed the beauty of her shape with the firm breasts and swelling gently-curved belly. But Marthe was in no mood for the contemplation of beauty and, drawing her dress above her breasts, she clutched François fiercely, pressing him to her in a frenzy of passion so that he soon forgot himself and thought only

to please her. He sought to hold back the fleeting moment of pleasure as he lay on her belly, hands cupped round her breasts, but even as he thought of it, he knew the pleasure had gone.

But the beauty of her body was still there and, as they lay naked before the fire, he fell to thinking of the beauty in a woman's body. As he stroked her belly, running his fingers down the curve of her thighs, the lines of her body filled him with wonderment. But the realisation was no sooner in his mind than he imagined the swift decay of that body.

Marthe, suddenly opening her eyes, asked him what he was thinking of.

"I was thinking of the beauty of your naked body," he answered. "And at the back of my mind was the memory of an old woman who used to live in the taverns when I was with Margot. She used to sit shrivelled up in the corner, never speaking, but one day, hearing that I had lived in a cloister, she followed me round and insisted on telling me of the days when she lived in the cloister of Notre-Dame, having been installed there as mistress of one of the chief ecclesiastics. He was a lame priest, one of the richest men in Paris, who finally managed to get in some scrape and ended his days in a dungeon not far from here, at Meung-sur-Loire. We became good friends and she loved to tell me of the days when she was rich and powerful, one of the beauties of the town, and she never tired of bemoaning the loss of beauty that faded so quickly. Old tripes we are, she would cry, good for nothing but to sit mumbling in front of the fire, cadging a drink here and there and living on the memory of our youth, the short happy days that were gone by us in a flash. That was her cry, and as I watched your young body, supple and gleaming in the freshness of its beauty, I could not help thinking that one day before so very long you too will be seated mumbling over the fire as did that old woman, with wrinkled forehead, fallen eyebrows, eyes all red and bleary, and lips like two skinny rags. These breasts will fall in like empty sacks, this rounded belly sag and those strong thighs become weak and shrivelled——"

"That's true," interjected Marthe, "but why do you take such a morbid, melancholy view of things? Can't you enjoy the beauty of a woman's body without sensing the decay to which it is doomed, as all things are doomed on this earth?"

"Melancholy!" cried François. "Yes, I suppose it is, but such decay is a tragedy fit to be worked into a poem and I must try my hand at it one day."

"Do what you like but don't let it interfere with our pleasure," said Marthe.

"Our pleasure must end soon," said François. "Your sister will be home."

"Why bother about my sister?" cried Marthe. "We have discussed this matter and, as we have always shared everything, we don't see why we shouldn't share you."

"So it has all been arranged, has it?" said François. "I'm to be the willing stallion and wear myself out in the service of two sisters!"

"Does the idea shock you, François? I told you we were simple country girls and this certainly seems the most sensible arrangement. However, if you wish otherwise——"

"No, don't alter your arrangements for me!" cried François. "I'm not shocked. The idea was only a little strange to me at first but it surely is the most reasonable proposition. All jealousies will be spared us and it's after all a more pleasant way for me to die than by hanging."

The door opened at that moment and Yvonne came into the room, crying out on his impudence. "I should think you would prefer it to hanging," she said, "although why you should mention hanging, I don't know. But there will be no question of dying when I have fed you up on some of the strong country wines I know. You'll have no reason to complain and neither shall we. I see that you have been instructing Marthe in the loss of her virginity and I am glad. I always told her that virginity was a bothersome thing to have about the house. I am sure that we can all three settle down together and enjoy ourselves this winter. As for the spring and the summer, they can take care of themselves."

François found that she was as good as her word, for their relationship was a happy one all that winter. There was never a cross word between the three of them, and he said that there was no reason why they should not be happy for such a state of affairs was common enough in the East. A Turk could be happy with two or more wives, so why not a Frenchman? And as he handled the girls' young bodies, he found that his attitude to women was changing, becoming less urgently material. The act of love now had more than animal significance in his eyes. He no longer used a woman's body as a vent for his own passions to be used and flung carelessly aside without a second thought. Rather did he seek to prolong contact, gaining more pleasure from the contemplation of beauty than the bare gratification of instinct. His mind too was much concerned with the inevitable decay of human beauty and his imaginations brought forth a poem he considered one of his best, which told the sorrows of the old woman in the tavern who had been used to confide her troubles to him because he too had once

lived in a cloister. He liked the poem because the low cadences exactly recalled the regretful tones of the old woman's voice as she mumbled her tale over the wine he had bought so that she might moisten her cracked old lips once more. But his liking was not shared by the two sisters when he read the poem, for they said they did not want to hear his useless imaginings.

But in the village tavern, where François had become a great favourite, the reading went down very well, although the general feeling was that his poem to Margot was a greater masterpiece. "Read us that again," they would say. And François read it again and again, liking the applause and the companionship given him for the sake of his poetry; a friendliness that helped to drive away the memory of his solitude, easing his mind of bitterness.

So the winter, which had promised to be so hard, passed easily and quickly. And in the spring, with health and vigour restored, he began to think of Guillaume and Paris again. The affair at Orléans should be forgotten by that time and a return to Paris might be attempted. His restlessness became obvious but the two girls could not bear the thought of separation. He reminded them of the pilgrimage he was making but Marthe said that he could abandon the pilgrimage, forget Paris and settle down with them at Saint-Generoux. Had not their winter been happy and could not the rest of their lives be so together?

This change of front disturbed François. He saw that the possessiveness of women would make them cling to him as long as possible and so, pretending acquiescence, he planned to leave them in the night when both were asleep, a note pinned to the pillow explaining his intention and his thanks.

The night was not easy to find. The sisters seemed to guess his purpose and one or the other slept closely to him. But one night he kept the wine flowing more freely than usual so that the girls fell into a sound sleep as soon as their heads touched the pillow, allowing him to snatch up his pack, ready near the door, and escape from the house. As he looked back for the last time at the house he had so fortunately discovered, he found himself thinking somewhat impersonally of the sisters. They had been good to him and probably saved his life but he knew that it was their bodies he would remember. Their faces would become dim and fade from memory but he would never forget their young, supple, and beautiful bodies.

All that night he stumbled along the roads until he was well out of the district and, cursing the hardness of the road to feet become soft in idleness, he decided to return the way he had come by seeking out a boat to take him up the Loire so that the walking

distance would be much shortened. Anticipating another pleasant idle journey along the river, feeling health once more in his body, he thought that he could safely look forward to success. This time there would be nothing to stop him running into his uncle's house to learn that his sins had been forgiven and that life and happiness in Paris were his once more after those long years of exile.

CHAPTER IX

THE pleasant course of the river did not reach so far as Paris. Regretfully François had to leave the boat near Orléans but, as he told the skipper, nothing on earth would induce him to put his nose inside the walls of that accursed town. The skipper had therefore sent a boat ashore at Meung-sur-Loire.

And François found Meung a pleasant little town, dominated by a large church. But even the atmosphere of the cloister could not depress him, for was he not on the last stages of his journey to Paris? What awaited him there could not be foreseen but he would at least see the town once more. It was over four years since he had seen Paris, four long burdensome years. Surely he had earned a little happiness? And saying that he must drink to Paris, he went into a tavern and ordered a bottle of wine. He sat quietly by himself, as was his habit, thinking of the meeting with Guillaume which was so near at hand. He could not imagine that the old man had changed or Marthe either . . .

The voices of men drinking near by brought him back to the present, and idly he listened to these locals discussing the activity of the police in rounding up the gangs of robbers who had troubled that district for so many years.

"Many of these scoundrels come from so far away as Paris," said one man.

"Paris!" cried another. "Why, some there be from Scotland and England and Palestine! One of the sergeants told me only the other night that they're called Coquillards, or brothers of the Coquille. They rob rich and poor alike, a heartless gang, so bad luck to them, say I."

François did not like the sound of this, scenting danger at the name of Coquillards. He had had nothing to do with them since leaving Angers but nothing could be left to chance. Colin himself might be working the district for he had often spoken of the

Orléannais, and thinking that Colin's name might yet lead him into danger François finished his drink and made for the door, determined to leave this town where the police were so eager in their search for wrongdoers.

But the door was flung open and three or four armed sergeants came in, asking who was ready to stand the law drinks this time. "We go round protecting the property of you fellows, your wives and your houses," cried one fat sergeant. "Never a word of thanks do we get, not even a swig of beer, and ours is thirsty work."

None of them took any notice of François and he was slipping out of the door when a hand grabbed his shoulder and he saw that one of the sergeants, a mean-looking little man, had lagged behind his companions.

"Not so fast, my friend!" cried this man. "Where are you off to in such a hurry?"

"My drink is finished," said François, "and I am off on my usual melancholy business. Hawking goods in all the villages of Christendom."

"A peddling rascal, eh?" said the sergeant. "A stealer of chickens, a raper of women, a loafer in hayricks, a pilferer of little children, perhaps a messenger for the Coquillards."

"Who are they?" muttered François. "I know nothing of them."

"Let the man alone," interjected the fat sergeant. "You've got these Coquillards on the brain. Come and have a drink."

The man hesitated and stared intently at François, crying that the others could do as they liked but he intended to search this hawker. "They're all a rascally crowd," he said, "and you know as well as I do, Jean, that there's money to be had for each Coquillard that we catch, and I mean this fellow to give an account of himself. If I'm wrong, there's no harm done."

"I'd be pleased to buy you all drinks, sir."

"That settles it," said the sergeant. "Money to spend on drinks indeed! Tell us the truth about yourself and how you come to be wandering through the Orléannais."

François saw that he had made a mistake. It was useless to say that his money had been sent to him by the Duke of Orléans. Escape was impossible for they had got themselves in front of the door and, putting as good a face on it as he could, he said there was nothing to tell. "I'm going on a pilgrimage."

"Then what's in this pack?" they asked.

"A few odds and ends so that I can earn food, and sheets of poetry written to amuse myself," answered François.

The fat sergeant turned the sheets over with his foot, disgusted to hear of a man who amused himself with poetry.

"Here, Robert!" he cried. "Your criminal has turned out to be a poet and, as you're the only one of us who can read, you'd best see if you can find amusement in these poems."

They turned away laughing and François, with a smile of relief, watched the little man rummaging disconsolately through the manuscripts, disappointment clouding his face. But suddenly the man shouted with glee and waved a paper triumphantly in his hand, calling on his friends to pay attention to the fine poem he had found for them. "Listen carefully," he cried, "and see whether I was the fool you thought me."

When the man began to read, François recognised a poem he had written to beguile a lonely hour, written in the secret jargon of the Coquillards which Colin had taught him. Helpless, frozen with horror, he stood listening to the poem which was likely to be his death-warrant:

Spelicans
Qui en tous temps
Avancez dedens le pogois,
Gourde piarde,
Et sur la tordre,
Desbousez les povres nyois,
Et pour soustenir voz pois,
Les duppes sont privez de caire,
Sans faire haire,
Ne hault braire,
Mais plantez ilz sont comme joncs,
Pour les sires qui sont si longs.

The man stared triumphantly at the blank faces around him. "Does it mean a thing to you?" he said. "You may well look foolish. I tell you that poem is written in the secret language of the Coquillards. I know a few words of this jargon."

"Of the Coquillards!" they cried.

And before François could move or cry out they had seized him, saying that Monseigneur Thibault d'Aussigny would doubtless like a word with him.

Desperately struggling, François cried out that they were mistaken, but paying no attention they pulled him outside the tavern and dragged him along in the dust of the road, until he abandoned the unequal struggle and said that he would go along quietly. And as he was marched down the road, back to the church he had seen, he heard one bystander ask another what he was taken for. "I don't know," said his friend, "but I heard of a chalice cup stolen from a church at Baccon and I expect he's the thief."

It was another calumny that would probably stick to him, but he forgot that unimportant detail whilst he cursed his own carelessness in keeping the poem by him. I liked the sound of it, he thought, and, after all, who would have imagined that it would lead me into trouble? How was I to know that I should come into parts where they were so hot against the Coquillards that every passer-by would be searched, or that a carping sergeant would know the jargon when he saw it?

François did not notice the contour of his prison, not stirring out of his lethargy until he was flung into a cell, but as his captors locked the door behind them he heard them say that a priest called Plaisance would be coming to examine him.

He had hardly the time to understand that he was again in danger of his life before the monk Plaisance came into his cell, carrying the unlucky poem in his hand, and François knew at once that he would get no pity from this man. He was a tall, white-faced monk, with the glitter of the fanatic in his eye, who wasted no time in explanation but asked how he had come to write in the jargon of the Coquillards. François decided that his only chance was to tell something of the truth and he answered that he had known the Coquillards in Paris, and was taught their language, but had shunned their company since leaving that town nearly five years before.

"I realised that I should be in danger of my life if I remembered such friends," he said, "and so I have taken good care to avoid them."

"Such danger might occur to you," answered the priest, "but you must have gone back to your old habits. An evildoer finds it difficult to give up his easy living, and if you did not pick up with the Coquillards how else have you lived all these years?"

"Living you'd hardly call it," said François, "but my poetry and a pedlar's pack have allowed me to scrape along somehow."

"Poetry never brought a man much money," said Plaisance.

"Mine was no exception, but it brought me into high company at times, as you'll find if you apply to the Duke of Orléans."

"I've no doubt he would speak for you," said the monk, "but he will never hear of your plight in this prison. The Duke of Orléans has too kind a heart. He is open to the wiles of any scoundrel, especially if he be a literary scoundrel, but that will not help you with the bishop. My Lord Bishop has determined to stamp the Coquillards out of this district and it is obvious that you could help us. Therefore the bishop will keep you here, no word of you will get outside these stone walls, and you will be squeezed and squeezed until you die or we get from you the information necessary to catch these enemies of God and man, these banded

thieves and murderers. You can save yourself much pain if you will let us have the names and hiding-places of the Coquillards around Orléans. Give us what we want and in return I will promise a pardon for you."

François listened hopelessly to the emotionless voice and frantically said that he could tell nothing. "Wouldn't a man betray his own mother to save himself from the tortures you devils inflict?" he cried. "Not one Coquillard in this district is known to me, and were you to get your Lord Bishop himself down here I could only say the same thing."

"That is what I shall do," said Plaisance. "He has his own infallible way with obstinate sinners."

And as the gaoler went out after the monk he told François not to expect much from that man. "God may seem far away, and prayers a waste of time, but prayers addressed to God may bring return, but no mercy is possible from Plaisance," said the man. "He's cruel and inhuman, like most of the monks, and takes joy in torturing men for the good of their souls."

François, plucking eagerly at the gaoler's sleeve, asked if his master, the bishop, was any better.

"Well, you'll judge for yourself," answered the man. "But if I were in your shoes I'd out with any information I had and give my best friend away without the least hesitation."

"But if I can't tell them anything?" said François.

"Then all I can say, mate, is that you're devilish unlucky, the unluckiest man in Christendom."

The iron door clanged behind him and François wondered if he should try an appeal to Paris, until he understood that they would not let his message through. When a wrong was done in the name of religion there was nothing to be said. And he remembered how happy he had been a moment before in the belief that he was at last near the end of his sufferings and on his way to Paris. And clinging to the iron bars across the window of his cell, watching the setting sun, François fell into loud, hysterical laughter as he realised that first he was ruined by consorting with the Coquillards and then he was likely to meet his death because he had avoided them.

Next day he was taken before Thibault d'Aussigny. Unlike Plaisance, the bishop was short and tubby. But his was not a comfortable chubbiness. Although not old, he had the disreputable belly of a monk cursed with a liver. He had a hooked and smooth nose like a beak, which he had a habit of tapping with his forefinger. His head was almost bald, with a few wisps of dirty, gingerish hair plastered over the bare spaces. His round eyes

blinked in a cantankerous manner over ugly spectacles with very thick lenses, which gave the eyes a bulging look. His appearance reminded François of a parrot disgruntled after a fight for a nut. He had an uncomfortable habit of giving an impatient shrug and lift to his shoulders, like the parrot straightening his wing-feathers after the fight. His words too were quick and eager, like the tap of a bird's beak.

"It is right that you should know my intentions," the bishop said. "These Coquillards have become a grave menace. It has become my duty to kill them without mercy, using any instrument God puts into my hands. That duty I mean to perform thoroughly. Were you born in Orléans, you would know that I carry out my duties. Once I put my hand to the plough, I never give up. This bishopric was held by me against the opposition of the King himself. So I advise you to tell me all you know."

François hastened to answer, but an uneasy feeling was upon him that Thibault was one of those upright, pitiless men who, once having made up their minds that a thing is right, would mercilessly persecute their own mothers if necessary. Such men would use any method, holding that the end justified the means. But, brushing these thoughts from his mind, François applied all his powers of persuasion and explained to the bishop that he was a clerk from Paris, a stranger to Meung and Orléans.

"A vagabond clerk!" interjected the bishop.

"A homeless clerk!" answered François. "But your reverence knows the old saying: He who has not slept in the wind and the rain is not fit for company."

But the attempted joke at his own expense was lost on Thibault: a man without the least sense of humour, full of his own importance and the importance of his services to God. And desperately François hurried on with his recital, explaining that when in Paris he had been interested in all kinds of men and had known something of the Coquillards, but had avoided them since leaving town.

"How long have you been gone from Paris?"

"Nearly five years——"

"And how have you been living all that time, my son? Ah, I remember Plaisance speaking of your poetry and a pedlar's pack. But from what I know of the Coquillards, and their friends, there's not one would be satisfied with the meagre living you could pick up in that way."

"But I saw that my only hope of safety was to avoid them," cried François. "Better a whole skin than a soft bed, I said."

"You must be a man of strong will to live thus. But at least you will tell me how it comes about that you have left Paris?"

"I killed a man in a tavern brawl," answered François, "and am on a pilgrimage of repentance."

"Is that the tally of all your crimes?" asked Thibault.

"Once, your reverence, I was mistakenly held in prison——"

"On a charge of theft at Orléans," cried the bishop, "and only released by the chance visit of the duke's young daughter."

The cleric had heard of him, perhaps even knew that he was wanted in Paris, and despairingly François cried out that, no matter what he had done, he was in minor orders, a graduate of the University of Paris, and entitled to consideration.

"The clerk who has strayed from God is the greatest of sinners," answered Thibault, "for he has seen God's face and yet denied Him. But, leaving these matters for a moment, will you give me the information I am seeking? Name the Coquillards in Orléans, tell me their hiding-places, and you are a free man."

François stared dully at the bishop and then shook his head.

"Hurry!" cried Thibault. "I'll not give you long to answer."

François cried that he knew nothing and could only be tried in Paris. "By ecclesiastical law," he muttered, "I am answerable only to the Church in Paris and should go there for trial."

"There will be no question of a trial," said Thibault.

"Then let me see the Duke of Orléans."

"You will not see a soul outside the thick walls of this prison, not a cry of yours will be heard until your lost memory is recovered. Come, will you speak?"

"Can't you see that I am helpless?" shouted François. "By the Blessed Mary, I swear that I don't know a single Coquillard in Orléans."

"You will be put in a dark pit," said the bishop. "Your food will be bread and your drink water. Your body will be disciplined so that the devil that is in you may be cast out and you may return to paths of righteousness. For the good of your soul, my son, your body must suffer."

François heard the door open behind him and saw two men waiting, one being the mean-looking sergeant who had caused his arrest. Suddenly he saw what his fate must be: solitary confinement and torture until death mercifully came to release him from his nameless pit. Screaming with fright, he flung himself at the feet of the bishop, clinging to his leg and shouting for mercy. But the two men dragged him away and he noticed, even at that moment, that the bishop made no movement to release himself but calmly waited for the men to free his leg. And as François was dragged along the floor to the door he saw that Thibault turned

away with a lift of his shoulders and opened a book, probably forgetting his prisoner with the first word read.

François struggled desperately along several corridors, slithering his dead weight against the two panting and cursing men, but they pulled him remorselessly to an open iron door and, with vicious kicks, propelled him inside the room, slamming the door behind him.

The hollow clang of iron reverberated through dimly-seen stone arches that stretched away in the darkness like vaults or the chapels of a cathedral. The chilly silence fell on François like a restraining sheet over his eyes, at once deadening his mind and his vain-struggling body.

The monk, Plaisance, was standing motionless in the middle of the near part of the chamber, hands tucked in the loose sleeves of his gown. A long pause followed as if he was allowing that silence to speak the prologue, and then, in a slow voice, the monk asked François if he had changed his mind.

Melodramatic fool! thought François: and his thoughts slid away from the monk, seized by insatiable curiosity about his surroundings. He felt helpless but his helplessness was so complete that there was a sort of comfort in it. He could do no else than allow himself to be borne along by the events about to take place, and although he knew there was to be unbearable horror, that was some moments away, there was an age of time still to be lived. He could at that moment afford to regard the matter impersonally. And so it was that his surroundings seemed so very important.

He regarded the damp flagstones at his feet. Eagerly he turned his head to catch at the sound of water dripping somewhere in the darkness on his left. But he could see nothing, for even the light from the furnace on the right of the room could not penetrate these shadows. Then a huge spider spattering on the floor in the blob of light cast by the monk's lantern became of absorbing interest: would the insect go to the left of the monk or to his right, if to the left, then François decided he would be reprieved. The spider went neither way, for it suddenly zigzagged back out of the light, but François had forgotten it and, head tilted, was staring at the two slits high up in the wall that served as windows. Then his intent gaze returned to the flickering furnace and the lean figure of the man before it, adding fuel and carefully turning the instruments of torture he was making red-hot and not even craning his neck for a second to glance at the fellow-creature who was about to be inhumanly tortured.

Who is this man? thought François resentfully. Will he go home to his wife to-night and stretch in her arms and yawn and laugh and

tell her of the scurvy knave they put to the question this day? Will she turn over on her side, content that her man is taking a part in securing the peace of the country? Or does he really not see me, are the screams of the men who come in here no more to him than those of pigs or sheep?

In the shadows behind the monk stood another silent figure. Both this man and Plaisance were watching François steadily and narrowly, as if in wonderment that a man who had struggled as he had struggled could so suddenly become still. They seemed to expect him to snatch a dagger magically from the air and plunge towards them.

The monk did not open his lips again, his question had fallen dully into space, but he broke the spell that was on them all by raising his hand and pointing just behind him. François followed his finger and saw the instrument that was to be his fate. Not those hot coals, not those glowing pincers, not the boot, but the rack. There it stood waiting to embrace him, that sinister obscenity with the shallow wooden trough worn smooth by the writhings of so much naked human flesh. A shudder passed over François, but the impersonal mood returned so quickly that he wondered if the shudder had been affectation and, under its drug-like influence, he was able to examine with calm each part of the instrument's mechanism.

The wooden frame had three thick wooden rollers, one at each end and one across the middle of the trough. The two end rollers were made to revolve outwards and had looped ropes to fix to the wrists and ankles of the victim. The roller in the middle caused the two end rollers to revolve outwards and this itself was controlled by a wheel. François knew that the pressure brought to bear could be strong enough to dislocate the shoulders and even the knee-joints or hips. The motive for the control by the single wheel in the middle was that one man could work the machine and so State secrets, wrenched from unwilling lips, need reach only his ears.

"State secrets!" François muttered. "Many of those they are likely to get from this unshaven tramp!"

But his mind was not single at that second: his dry tongue uttered the words, they did not come out of his consciousness. One part of his mind told him not to worry: such things happened to other men, one talked of them in taverns or fingered a twisted limb in easy pity, but they never happened to oneself. And a larger part of his being was above all conscious of that moment in time. That moment above all other moments. He had no past and no future. His whole faculty was concentrated in that one miserable fraction

of Time. He was acutely and inhumanly sensitive to his surroundings and his being. He could feel the pulse of each wrist, the throbbing of his heart, the life in every hair of his head! That moment was of supreme, pathetic importance! He had never lived before and somehow felt that he would never again live in the same way.

And then the least expected feeling took possession of him: a feeling of ecstasy. Something was about to be done to him that might change his whole being. Boredom, discomfort, hatred, despair: he had known them all; but the sharpness of prolonged intolerable physical pain he had never known. Pain, infinite mysterious Pain! It would take on a mystical significance. He felt in awe of it but not frightened, as before something holy, and his bewitchment induced a kind of mystical exultation. He was in love with the idea of Pain, perhaps it would reveal the infinite to him and the dross would fall away from his soul, perhaps the flagellating monks were in the right of it! The tortured Saints or the white-faced sacrifice on the Druidic altar must have felt as he did: an ecstatic trance of exultation, a thirsting to bare his own bosom and gouge his own flesh with the knife!

A fine Saint! said a cool voice inside himself. A fine Saint indeed! Who ever heard of a Saint without a Cause!

Then the monk made a sign with his hand and the assistant came from the shadows behind him. He was a fat man with an unhealthily white face, who breathed heavily and stealthily and approached his victim warily, obviously expecting trouble. His breath came in sudden wheezy gasps, through half-parted, blubbery lips, exhaling a strong smell of onions and cheese.

That smell made François realise how hungry he was: the last of his unreasonable exultation ebbed from him and he apathetically allowed the man's fat hands to paw his body and take off all his ragged clothes save the trunks. Even the hose were removed and François looked down at his feet, feeling an intense loathing run over his body at the touch of the green slime on the stone floor under his bare feet. Then he noticed how dirty they were and, in a spurt of helpless anger, asked Plaisance how he expected a man should keep his feet clean.

"Would you keep your feet clean, Sir Priest," he shouted, "if you had walked about France for four years? Never mind the peas in your sandals! Answer me about the dirt!"

The monk did not appear to hear the words but stood regarding Villon's naked body with a wild gleam in his eye. And the rage left François as quickly as it had come and passed like a play of wind on a stagnant pool. Listlessly he crossed his scraggy arms on his

thin chest, thinking how cold it was, but grateful for a heat from the furnace that played on his buttock. Again he examined his poor twisted feet as if he saw them for the first time, looking as they did like alien fungoid growths on the dark stone, and felt an impersonal pity even for them.

The man's hand on his shoulder guided him slowly towards the rack, and stiffly he obeyed its summons. This was what human beings did to each other! Was there ever a more foolish animal than man? Could there be? A more foolish or more cruel?

The fat assistant suddenly stooped wheezily and, looping his arms round Villon's knees and shoulders, swung him off his feet, pressing his poor nakedness for a moment against his greasy leather apron. And stooping again, breathing hotly on Villon's neck, he dropped him gently into the shallow trough of the rack.

Gently he uses me, thought François. Gently he uses me and perhaps feels sorry for me. But he will do whatever bestial thing he is told to do.

There was a feeling of heat in the air, the throbbing of an unseen and unclean thing. François had allowed himself to settle inertly but the ominously smooth sides of the trough became disgusting to his skin and he felt his petty, naked body draw into itself, outraged.

An insult to human dignity and integrity, François thought. That men should do such things to each other, especially in the name of Law and Order and of Christ.

But he felt no heat in the remark for his mind threw it off mechanically. His real warm live self was skulking somewhere deep down, below layer upon layer of consciousness, supine and yet attentive, waiting for the Beast to come out of its lair!

An eternity of time, that precious time, passed heavily. And yet another part of himself was poised outside his body, looking pityingly down on that poor flesh, lying foolishly like a dead sheep on a slab. What poor contemptible meat it was, with its refined prickling goose-flesh skin, so outraged at the touch of a wooden trough! How despicable! Why should that man at the furnace turn his back to worry about a thing like that! He was right. Let it be seared up with Pain and pass away and shrivel quickly into nothingness!

The torturer, still wheezing fussily, slipped the loops of stiff rope over Villon's wrists and lumbered round to do the same to his ankles. Then he took his stand by the wheel in the middle and running his expert eye along Villon's body, like a man carefully

trimming the inequalities in a hedge, he turned the wheel so that his victim's arms and legs were stretched to their fullest extent and yet not far enough to give the least pain. At that exact second, he took his hands off the wheel, not even bothering to look at Villon's face, so certain was he of his own body-judgment, and stood watching the monk stolidly.

The monk, still silent, looked down at François, that animal gleam in his eye. His lips being too dry seemingly for movement, he raised his eyebrows inquiringly. But François was determined to give no sign and was indeed childishly pleased that the Pain had been stayed for a time and could even smile at the man's tense, solemn face. They stared at each other, sadistic lust on the one side and on the other still that unawareness of curiosity: for François could see how the monk's eyes appeared to glow and narrow and cross and never keep still. Then the monk slowly raised a quivering finger in the air and pushed his contorted face eagerly forward.

The torturer tensed his body and took a long pull at the wheel and suddenly François came to a realisation of his position again and wanted to run away screaming. The wheel did not seem to move nor the roller under his body but it creaked, yes, it creaked. Why, in God's name, can't they grease it? thought François: and then, ah, then it came. The Pain at his wrists and his ankles! The hot-smelling Beast out of its lair!

But I can stand it, thought François, his mind desperately clutching at the familiar support of words. I can stand it. It is nothing! Ah, it comes again! Pulling, mauling at my wrists and my ankles and my shoulders and my thighs. Mother of God, Mother of God, Holy Mother, they hurt me, my wrists and my ankles, yes, they do. My bones crack, my skin splits like a frying sausage! My legs and arms stretch out like the fingers of God, yes, like God's fingers, because, after all, I am a Saint, yes, a Saint without a Cause, yes, that's how it went! Ecstatic trance! The Holiness of Pain! God's mercy, what a fool I am! But I can stand it, by the teeth of God, I stand it, I stand it, I stand it, yes, I stand it. That drum-drum-drumming in my temples, there it goes. Salt tears on my face, parched tongue licking, licking pitifully, lick-lick-licking dog at puddle, a puddle of blood. Careful, you fools, oh, careful, you'll sure as fate have arms and legs out of sockets, have them waving bloodily on ropes, then pretty fools you'd look! Holy Mother, my legs are creaking at the groins, why not grease them, they want greasing I tell you, an excellent idea, and the bones of my chest they are cracking. So this is it, this is how one dies—ignominious it is, insulting to human integrity and dignity—bite

lips, fool, bite 'em hard through, never mind the blood and the salt, the blood and the salt and the hot smell of the Beast—bite through them and you can stand it, the blood and the salt, even stand this bolt-eyed leap into death—ah, into death . . .

CHAPTER X

WHEN François came to his senses again he was in darkness, and flung face downwards on a bundle of straw. He gathered his strained memories of this latest misfortune and remembered Thibault d'Aussigny and the torture-chamber. In imagination, he was again stretched on the rack enduring those few moments of torture and, shivering, he realised that he was chilled to the bone. Impulsively he moved his body and, seized by burning pains in his wrists, arms, and legs, he fell down on the straw again. The agony made him cry aloud and almost faint, and he lay listless, afraid to make another effort. But at last he managed to raise himself to his knees. His wrists and ankles could not bear his weight and he awkwardly groped his way along on his hands and knees. The ground was damp to his touch but he had not gone far before his head struck against a wall of damp earth. This did not have the look of freedom and he scrabbled frenziedly along this wall, discovering that it was circular in shape. And, with a sudden constriction of fear upon him, he raised his head as best he could. There, high above him, he saw a few bright stars twinkling and knew that he was in the pit the bishop had promised him. Leaning against the wall, he stared hopelessly up at the freedom so far away, reliving his interview with Thibault, rage choking his throat.

There was never a sound save the steady drip of water on the ground in some unseen corner of his prison. François watched the stars slowly vanish and a brightening sky showed that his prison was a deep pit only a few yards in circumference, with walls that sloped inwards like a funnel. He looked around him, turning his head from side to side like an animal staring at the trap which grips its leg, and his mind fell into a sort of numb blankness. When he came to himself once more there was blue sky in the narrow opening and a bright sun, but the sunlight came only a few feet down the shaft, leaving him in half-darkness to wonder at the unseen horrors that kept him company. The menacing quietness was getting on his nerves, and he decided to shout for help so that

he could hear a human voice and know for sure that he was not amongst the damned in Purgatory.

His shouts went unanswered for a time but a man poked his head in the opening at last and asked what was wanted.

"I'm sorry," said François, "but I wasn't sure if I was dreaming. Will you tell me where I am and what they intend for me?"

"Why, you're in the pit at Meung," said the gaoler, "and Robert, the executioner of Orléans, will be coming here to see you again."

"A pretty thought!" cried François. "My body is still crying out in agony as a result of their tender handling."

"That was a mere pin-prick," said the gaoler. "There's worse to come and they're under strict orders not to kill you. They are excellent judges of the punishment a man can stand before he gives up the ghost. And you mustn't expect to get off so lightly next time. Friend Robert had his knuckles badly rapped by Plaisance because you fainted so quickly under torture yesterday and Robert is jealous of his reputation as a torturer. He'll see that you keep awake next time."

"But this is no place to keep the worst man on earth!" cried François. "Only animals are kept in pits."

"That's outside my job," said the gaoler. "All I know is that you will get a meal of bread and water twice a day and that you'll see no human face excepting my own and those of the torturers, if they can be called human. The bishop said I might add that if the devil flies out of your body, unable to stomach the torture and the poor food administered thereto, you are to call out for me and I will take you to the priests, who will be ready to take down your deposition. Once this is verified, you are a free man."

"This cant of the devil bears his stamp," said François.

But the gaoler's head had gone, leaving a clear view of the patch of sky once more, and François bemoaned his lot. Was there ever such an unlucky man? His freedom could only be gained if he betrayed men he'd never heard of or seen. And he wondered if it was any good making a false deposition to gain time, but he soon saw that they would quickly discover the falseness and come more eagerly to his torture. And he cursed the bishop, his rage making him forget the pain of his racked body, until he collapsed in a heap on the straw, foam at his lips, his mind twisted awry.

But months of solitary misery stretched away before him, and if his time was spent in vicious raving, madness would come upon him and, sitting up in the straw, he said that he must not go mad. He must get back to Paris. A miracle got him out of the prison at Orléans and maybe another miracle would rescue him from that horrible pit. He forced himself to be calm and dug his finger-

nails into the palms of his hands, reawakening the pain of his fingers and wrists so that his thoughts might be turned away from Thibault d'Aussigny.

To the same end, he staggered to his feet and crawled round the pit, judging the length of the slimy wall and wondering if he would stumble across the bones of other prisoners who had mouldered to their deaths. Much exhausted, he was glad to go back to the straw, where he rested on his back, staring at the blue sky far above his head. Enviously he thought of the men who moved easily about on the ground above and memories came back of his own past life. He had thought himself miserable but already he would gladly promise to spend the rest of his days as a pilgrim could he but be drawn up from that pit.

Next morning he woke shivering with cold, for there was nothing but the straw to keep out the night air, and he had hardly opened his eyes before the gaoler came to the top, saying that friend Robert had come from Orléans and was waiting.

"Can't they leave me alone for a while!" cried François.

"They mean to break your spirit before you can recover," said the man. "Get into this basket and I'll have you hauled up."

François climbed painfully into the basket and was swung to the ground, where the gaoler took him by the arm and led him across a yard.

"It would be a kindness to let me stay here in the sun for a little while," François said.

"More than my job is worth," answered the gaoler. "But a man who has suffered the rack can't be expected to walk quickly."

And François dragged his steps and turned his face up to the sun, praying that some miracle would come to save him, a miracle or the end of the world. But God was silent and, with a shudder, he passed into the dark torture-chamber.

Robert and his assistants seized him and this time fastened his wrists to a ring in the wall and bound his legs together. They would not answer his frantic questions but suddenly his head was flung back and, whilst one of the assistants held a piece of fine muslin over his mouth, Robert poured water down his gullet. Choking, he tried to turn his head, but it was pulled back and he could not avoid the steady stream of water. He shut his mouth but a piece of wood was thrust between his teeth and the jaws wrenched open. Remorselessly Robert poured jug after jug of water into the muslin and François felt his belly swell and his guts distend to bursting-point inside him. Still the water flowed into his mouth and he was soon incapable of thought. He was stifling,

his head was nigh to bursting, and there was the roar of a thousand waterfalls drumming in his ears.

The hand of the torturer was stayed at last and they threw him back into his pit, saying he was the most obstinate sinner they had seen but that they would be back to see him before long. That promise was faithfully kept and, in the following weeks, François regularly suffered torture. Sometimes Robert put fetters and iron balls on his body, forcing a wooden gag in his mouth; sometimes he crushed his feet and knees between two boards; sometimes he would revert to the rack and yet again to the question by water, a torture François came to dread most of all.

In between these visits to the torture-chamber he lay amidst the straw and filth of his pit, his body torn by pain, the long days and weeks dragging slowly away. All he saw was the pit with its dark sides of wet mud that never dried and, high above, there was that tiny opening which gave a glimpse of the summer sky. That small space came to mean a great deal. It was his only link with the world outside the prison and eagerly he would watch its changing nature. Usually he would see blue sky with streaks of white cloud fleeting across, but sometimes there would be dark clouds and then he knew that rain would come, a welcome summer rain to freshen his stinking pit. And sometimes he would be excited by glimpses of a heron or a hawk sailing freely across the open spaces: little excitements but they helped him to keep his hold on sanity.

How that summons to torture from the gaoler brought a sickly fear into his bowels! First, there was the slow climb into the basket; the reluctant farewell to the fresh air and sunshine as he passed across the yard; the strangely impersonal feeling as he wondered which of the tortures they had in store for him that day. And then he was writhing in the agony of the torture, now kept deliberately within bounds so that unconsciousness with its blessed relief would not come too soon. Then his inert body was lowered back into its pit after the questioning and water heaved down from aloft to wake him up: an awakening to life that became more and more reluctant.

At first there had been disgust at his filthy surroundings; the wet mud caking off the walls and the floor staled by his own droppings. The insects running over his body and the rats biting at his eyes frightened him, but time passed and disgust and fear were forgotten as he sank more completely into a fatal lethargy. Delirium came upon him and, wild-staring, he got into the habit of talking aloud to himself. Often he imagined that he was in Purgatory and that Colin and Regnier and Margot and all his friends were near by in similar pits and that their groans made a great clamour in his ears.

Deliriously he relived incidents of his past life: the masters intoning in the schools; the serenade Colin had arranged for Catherine; the student riots; the refusal to grant his letters of nomination; the morning he left the house at Saint-Benoît to live with Margot, slinking away like Judas; the life in Margot's house; the killing of Sermoise, the visit to the surgeon and the subsequent flight from Paris; the unexpected affair with the Abbess of Pourras and the robbery at the College of Navarre. He saw Regnier on his gibbet and underneath there were girls who sold their bodies miserably, heedless of the dead man swinging above them.

And in his saner moments François deliberately provoked memories of Margot and the nights they had enjoyed together; imagining every detail of their intimacy in an effort to transport himself from his distress. But no memories were sufficient distraction and his life passed like a nightmare, so that he hardly knew when he was awake and when sleeping. He was in a wasting fever due to the damp air and foulness of his pit, an illness he hoped might end his miseries. But the life dragged on in him and often, awakened by cold in the dead of night, he would stagger to his feet and ask that death might be allowed to take him. The stars looked coldly down, mocking his impotence; and scratching at the mud walls, in a feeble effort to climb them, he screamed for his captors to end his torture; crying and beseeching until he fell senseless to the ground once more.

He then knew that he had come to the end of his endurance and, seeking to save his mind, he believed that if he could get hold of pen and paper he might put the fear of madness away from him. The gaoler came with his bread and water and François eagerly asked his help.

"It's against strict rules and I should lose my job here," said the man. "Wouldn't I be a fool to risk this so that you can scribble a few senseless lines of poetry?"

Entreaties and promises were useless. But next day the gaoler called to him and said that he had brought the pens and the ink and the paper for which he was asking. "Here they are," he whispered. "I'll lower them in the basket. Make a hole in the wall and cover them up. There's not much paper but it's all I could afford to buy."

"I shan't need much," said François. "There's only a few hours when it's light enough for a man to write in this hole. But why have you changed your mind?"

"It's my wife you must thank," said the gaoler. "It was she persuaded me to risk my job. When I told her of you in this pit, a young man wishing to find consolation in poetry, her heart was

touched. She said that you must be going to write verses to your young woman."

"Thank her for her kindness. But it's not love-poetry I'll be writing, for the torture I have undergone would make Abélard himself forget Héloïse."

"I can't imagine how you get pleasure from that sort of thing," said the gaoler.

"A kind of vent to the feelings," cried François.

"Well, I hope it does you good," said the man. "But, for God's sake, keep your precious poems hidden."

"That I'll do, never fear," answered François.

The darkness seemed to lighten more slowly than usual but at last François could clearly see the marks of his pen, and diffidently, his swollen fingers giving him pain, he tried his hand at rewriting a few lines of his poem to Margot. That poem was written when he had friends enough and to spare. Those old-time friends of his. Would they go out of their way to help him if they had the chance? His mind slid into suppleness at the feel of a pen between his fingers and he clearly saw all his companions cynically roistering with no thought of their lost poet to trouble them.

And François cried: "Have pity on me, have pity on me, all my friends—if you can spare the time. I am lying cast out in a ditch which has neither holly nor hawthorn growing over it; in most miserable exile into which Fortune, by God's will, has led me. Girls and lovers, old and young and fresh! Dancers and those acrobats I used to see dancing the comic dances, quick as darts and sharp as spurs. O, my melodious warblers, singing clear as mule-bells, will you leave him here, your poor Villon?"

And he wrote:

Aiez pitié, aiez pitié de moy,
A tout le moins, si vous plaist, mes amis !
En fosse gis, non pas soubz houx ne may,
En cest exil ouquel je suis transmis
Par Fortune, comme Dieu l'a permis.
Filles, amans, jeunes gens et nouveaulx,
Danceurs, sauteurs, faisant le piez de veaux,
Gousiers tintans cler comme cascaveaux,
Le lesserez la, le povre Villon?

"O happy singers, when the mood comes upon you, sweetly do you sing and take no orders; merry fellows, bold in word and deed; noble spendthrifts, lavish with your false gold; wits and feckless ones; you are cutting things too fine. Whilst you loiter, your friend is dying. Writers of songs and roundels! When he is dead you'll hasten to burn candles for him, yet where he now

lies there's neither candle nor breeze, and thick walls bandage his eyes. Will you leave him here, your poor Villon?"

Chantres chantans a plaisance, sans loy,
Galens, rians, plaisans en fais et dis,
Courens, alans, francs de faulx or, d'aloy,
Gens d'esperit, ung petit estourdis,
Trop demourez, car il meurt entandis
Faiseurs de laiz, de motetz et rondeaux,
Quand mort sera, vous lui ferez chaudes!
Ou gist, il n'entre escler ne tourbillon:
De murs espoix on lui a fait bandes.
Le lesserez la, le povre Villon?

"Just come, my noble friends, and take a look at him in his piteous state. To be sure, he pays no taxes and gives no homage to emperor or king, being subject only to God who rules in the heaven right above his head. See how he is made to fast even on Sundays and Tuesdays, so that his teeth show like the prongs of a rake. His meat is dry bread and no cake, whilst his guts are washed out afterwards with torrents of cold water. Notice how he lies, without table or trestles. Will you leave him here, your poor Villon?"

Venez le veoir en ce piteux arroy,
Nobles hommes, francs de quart et de dix,
Qui ne tenez d'empereur ne de roy,
Mais seulement de Dieu de Paradis:
Jeuner lui fault dimanches à merdis,
Dont les dens a plus longues que ratteaux;
Après pain sec, non pas après gasteaux,
En ses boyaulx verse eau a gros bouillon;
Bas en terre, table n'a ne tresteaux.
Le lesserez la, le povre Villon.

"O my royal beauties, join together all of you and get me the King's pardon with its royal seal, hastening to lug me up from here in some basket or another. Even swine hurry to the rescue when one of their mates squeals for help. Will you leave him here, your poor Villon?"

Princes nommez, anciens, jouvenceaux,
Impetrez moy graces et royaulx seaux,
Et me montez en quelque corbillon.
Ainsi se font, l'un a l'autre, pourceaux,
Car, ou l'un brait, ils fuyent a monceaux.
Le lesserez la, le povre Villon?

The darkness was over him once more, he could not see the words he had written, but the old sense of elation was with him and, as he hid the paper, he said that they could not take his mind away. My body may be weak but my pen has not lost its gusto, he

thought. They may torture my body but I shall still be Villon the poet. It's not every man and not every poet could write such a poem as I've just written, cooped up here in a filthy animal's pit, my body a festering sore.

Thought of the poem hidden in the mud wall of his pit gave François greater strength to bear his miseries just as he believed that all strength was gone from him. The hard hands of the executioner lost much of their power for he dreamed of another poem he would write. All through the hot summer months he lay gasping for breath at the bottom of his stifling pit, but never a complaint reached his gaoler, for this poem was never out of his mind. It must embody the poetry he had written on his travels and tell all the miseries he had endured and the considerations of life and mortality which were ever in his thoughts.

Times were when he would laugh at himself, asking what good it would do him if he lived to write a poem that men quoted a hundred years after his death. Would that give life to his bones powdering in the grave? But his cynicism was powerless against the urge that swept over him. He was caught up in a bursting eagerness to create. Although he could not move his body a yard without great pain, his mind was keen and bright as it had never been before, bright as a shining sword, eager to break out of the surrounding walls and begin the heavy task. But he knew that the poem would not be written until he was free and could feel Paris close at hand once more. And his chance of freedom seemed slight enough, for at last the torture had been stopped. He was left to himself and both bishop and torturer seemed to have forgotten him as he lay rotting to death in the pit.

But one day the gaoler came with talk of the new king France had, Charles having died and been succeeded by his son, Louis.

"It doesn't matter to me who sits on the throne," said François. "This Louis is supposed to have come in disguise to my tavern when he was Dauphin but he won't start crying out for me as soon as he's King."

"But Louis is travelling this way," cried the gaoler. "He may rescue you whether your name comes to his mind or not."

"How's that?"

"Why, surely you know that it is the custom to release all prisoners when a new king first visits the towns in his kingdom. They drag up even the worst criminals from the dungeons of those towns he visits."

François got slowly to his feet and looked up at the gaoler, asking if the other miracle could be happening. "Shall I be spared to write my poem?"

"Don't build your hopes too high. The King may change the direction of his journey," said the gaoler. "But if ever a man deserved such luck, then you're the one. You've suffered more than any man I've had here and I would never have believed that one of your little strength could have stood it so well."

"I should have been mad now but for the kindness of you and your wife," said François. "But tell me, Jacques, couldn't Thibault d'Aussigny take what's left of me out of this pit and have me hidden out of the way of the King's mercy?"

"He could do so but I don't think he will," answered the gaoler. "The bishop can be cruel when he thinks he is right but he is a just man, according to his own lights, and would do nothing underhand."

"I wish I could have the same belief," said François. "But even if he does keep me here the King may not come to a small town like Meung. If only my uncle Guillaume knew of my plight, he would whisper a word in the right quarter. But, alas, he knows nothing and goes anxiously about his duties, hoping against hope that his nephew is still alive."

"We too can only hope for the best," said the gaoler.

When October came, this last hope had been forgotten, and on the twentieth of that month François was crouched on one side of his pit, vainly seeking shelter from the cold rain which poured down on him, when the basket was lowered from aloft. François could not see his friend, the gaoler, for his eyes had become dim, but listlessly he asked if they wanted to torture him again. "Will nothing touch a priest's compassion?" he muttered.

A violent fit of coughing came over him which shook his body grievously, and as he stepped out of the basket he told the gaoler these spasms were becoming more frequent.

"The dampness down there hasn't done you much good these long months," said the gaoler, "but perhaps you will shake that off with a change of air."

"Change of air, what do you mean?" muttered François. "I've never known you laugh at my misfortune before."

"I'm not mocking at you," answered Jacques. "I've come to tell you that King Louis is here in Meung as I said he would be, and you are a free man. I thought the news had best be broken to you slowly."

François lifted his head and stared helplessly at the gaoler, wondering if this was another dream. Eagerly he snatched at the man's arm and, finding it solid beneath his fingers, he laughed hysterically.

"The miracle has happened then," he cried. "The devil still looks after his own and my poem will after all be written."

"Now pull yourself together, man," said the gaoler. "Your troubles here are over."

"But they've left their mark," answered François. And he held out his maimed, twisted hands and looked down at his legs, which twitched uncontrollably. His whole body shivered with fever and weakness brought on by torture, exposure, and starvation.

The two men stared at each other and the gaoler said: "Aye, mate, they've done badly by you and brought you to a pretty pass. But I've no doubt you'll recover and live to laugh at them yet."

"I think not," said François. "A young man of thirty and I now have the body of a man twice my age. However, if God gives me the strength to live a little longer, I'll remember Thibault d'Aussigny in a poem that'll bring him more fame than his bishopric, of a kind he won't much like. But I'll not talk of poetry to you, knowing you think it a waste of time. I'd rather spend our last moments together in speaking of your kindness to me."

"Don't mention it," said the gaoler. "Such treatment as you've had makes me hate my job. But don't waste your time here. Get on your way before Thibault can clap you into gaol again, and if I were in your place I should make straight for Paris and the uncle you have been telling me about. Here, I have brought the pedlar's pack with some of your poems still in it. My wife hoarded them against your release."

"God bless you both!" cried François. "I shall be needing those poems."

"And this is a strong stick I cut for you," said the gaoler. "It will help you on your way and also serve to ward off the many dogs there are in these parts."

"A happy thought, for my legs feel as if they don't belong to me," said François.

And saying good-bye to his gaoler, commending him to God for the kindness he had shown, he made off slowly down the road, dragging his limbs painfully and leaning heavily on his stick. He was forced to rest before he had gone a hundred yards, shaken by a violent fit of coughing, but he rested no longer than was necessary and, inquiring out the way, he set out grimly down the wet road without a backward glance at Meung. For he had forgotten Meung. All he thought on was the poem that must be written, even if they took him afterwards and strung him up as they had done Regnier. The years of his wandering were at last finished and fear for his own body would no longer send him running all over France. He had come upon a contempt for his own life and all he asked was the chance to find some shelter near Paris where he could be in peace for a few months. Guillaume could help him

to find that sanctuary and he dragged himself slowly over France, happy in the thought that each faltering step took him nearer Paris.

As François begged his way, from village to village, he thought no longer of the women and the comforts for which he had hankered all through these years of exile. Margot was forgotten and the long mocking face of Catherine; his own troubles seemed faint, his bodily distress unreal, and all he had previously held dear became of no account. An outcast beggar he was, turned rudely from taverns and houses, but he was quietly meditating the poem he knew would this time be written. Nothing could touch him, neither hunger nor derision. No matter where he was, on the open road or resting in some stable, the cadences of the poem rose and fell in his mind. The form of it was slowly taking shape and he watched its formation with awe. The poem took on a life of its own and the beautiful murmur of it filled him with ecstasy so that the tramp, spurned as he was by kitchenmaids and labourers for an absentminded fool, became truly a man who listened to an inward voice.

PART III

CHAPTER I

FRANÇOIS only smiled when they told him that Paris was just down the hill. But soon he was in sight of familiar landmarks: the stone cross and the fountain where he had said good-bye to his uncle, the tavern in which he had loitered that same day until driven out by the boring talk of the yokels, and then the walls of the town itself. To approach nearer would be dangerous and, leaning on his stick, he stared at Paris and thought of that last Christmas five years before, when the College of Navarre was robbed so that he and Colin and Regnier might live comfortably in exile. When he followed the course of his own life, seeing himself fleeing restlessly along the roads of France, driven here and there like a leaf in the wind, it was difficult to believe that he had ever lived a tranquil life in the cloister or roistered carelessly in the taverns of Paris. In all those years he had longed to see Paris and Guillaume again, but now that he was within sight of the town he realised that he was no longer single-minded in this ambition. There was not the delirious joy and the exhilaration he had expected to find. It was pleasant to see the town again but he was eager to be off to the writing of his poem. He was no longer thinking of women and the comfort of his own body. There was nothing in him but this strange compulsion to write of himself and his sufferings. And, thinking of himself five years before, he tried to remember what sort of a man he had been. His friends he remembered clearly, those gay lads who would now be dead or become beggars or rich men or monks, but he was not sure of himself. A hazy sapless man he seemed to himself and the change was difficult to trace. When could he have said that the old François Villon had gone and was no more? Or could it be that the change within himself was imaginary?

But no more time could be wasted in fruitless speculation for the police in Paris would make no distinction between the old François Villon and the new. And then he thought that maybe Guillaume was dead. He had been getting an old man in fifty-six and the worry of the succeeding years might have been too much for him. A message must be got to the priest at once and François went into a beer-house, asking the few people inside if there was any would take a message for him to the Saint-Benoît quarter down the rue Saint-Jacques. The men asked what he would pay, and

hearing that he had no money refused to go. François said that it was a matter of life and death, but they remained stolid over their beer and advised him to clear out before they asked why he was afraid to go himself. He appealed to the only woman in the place, but she asked him why he expected her to run an errand without reward any more than the men.

"Here, you can have what's left of my stock," he said, "if only you'll go to Saint-Benoît."

"Let's have a look," said the woman. "Just as I thought: a rusty knife, a few lengths of dirty silk, a buckle, a brooch, strings for a lute, a purse, and a bundle of poetry. What do you think I'll be doing with lute-strings and poems? However, for sake of the brooch, I'll run your errand, seeing that Saint-Benoît isn't far away."

"You'll be quite safe," said François: and, spending his last copper on the purchase of paper and ink from the landlord, he scribbled his message to Guillaume, explaining his position and asking the priest to give him another letter of introduction to the monastery near Bourg-la-Reine so that he might hide.

François handed the note to the woman, begging her to take great care of it, and as he watched her down the road he felt that he was no longer alone. For five years he had had to support his sufferings and his silences alone. All his strength had been drawn from within himself, no friend had shared his misery and cheered his solitude, but his safety was once again in Guillaume's care. He could relax at last, forgetting that he was a hunted man, and it was with a sense of luxury that he stretched out on a bench outside the door where, despite the cold, he fell into a deep, untroubled sleep.

He was awakened by the woman tugging at his arm and, grabbing her shoulders, he asked if the priest was still alive.

"Oh, he's alive, right enough," answered the woman, "and his precious servant too! Would you believe that she started to question me, imagining that I was living with you? As if I would take up with a broken-down scarecrow like yourself!"

"No chance of that," said François. "I haven't a sou to buy a candle to bless myself with. All the women will now look on me as used up and finished and, God willing, will leave me in peace. But, tell me, how was the canon looking? Did he seem pleased to read my note or is his mind wandering?"

"I expect he looked much like any other priest, fat and prosperous," the woman said, "but in fact I hardly looked at the man for I was anxious to be gone."

The moment could be put off no longer and, snatching the note from his messenger, François broke the seal and tried to read

Guillaume's message. The familiar writing, round and neat, was blurred for a time but, brushing his hand across his eyes, he set himself to the reading of the letter, in which Guillaume said how happy he was to hear from his nephew at last. The canon said that now he was sure his nephew was still alive he would redouble his efforts for a pardon and he was to remain in the monastery until it came. The police had not forgotten the college robbery and no risks must be taken.

"God bless the man!" cried François. "Aye, I shall have the patience to stay there this time, no doubt of that."

And eagerly he hurried into the road to beg a lift in any cart that might be going near Bourg-la-Reine. He was lucky in his search at once and, telling the driver that he was going to the monastery there and would offer up prayers for him as a reward for the lift, he settled down in the straw until the jog-trot of the hooves again lulled his tired body to sleep.

"You were having so sound a sleep, mate, that I hadn't the heart to wake you," said the driver. "This is the monastery you were wanting. But are you sure it is a monastery you're after? You're a strange sort of man to be taken with the idea of becoming a monk."

"That's the place I want," said François, "and don't forget some of the highest men in the Church have been farm-workers like you and tramps like me."

"Then if you're going to be a holy man, don't you be forgetting those prayers you're going to say for me," said the driver. "That was the bargain. Your prayers for my soul in exchange for a lift in my cart."

"I'll not forget," said François. "You'll get to heaven on my prayers, sure enough."

He took a short-cut across the snow-covered fields to the monastery, remembering his reluctant visit years back after the killing of Sermoise, when he had sought consolation with the Abbess of Pourras. The brother at the postern had grown old but, after some argument, he forced past him and found his way to the abbot's cell. A different voice answered his knock and he learned that the abbot he had known was dead these three years, but he handed over the letter, confident that his uncle's word would carry as much weight with the second abbot as the first. The abbot looked up from his reading and said that his brother in God, the canon of Saint-Benoît, asked that shelter might be given to a young man who craved peace and seclusion.

"But nothing is mentioned of God and prayers," said the abbot. "Is it your wish to become a novice of our Order?"

"Not at the moment, reverend father. I am not yet strong enough for prayers and fasting."

"I can see you are a man who has suffered much, my son, but never forget that the proper way to recovery is through the spirit. Your request is a strange one and I am not sure that I ought to grant it. But as the message is signed by the canon of Saint-Benoît I will order that a cell be put aside for your use. You will be asked no questions and left entirely to yourself. Food will be brought you twice a day, the simple food of the monks, and you will be free to pray and exercise with the brothers, as you wish."

"God bless you for your kindness, father," said François. "Only one more request will I make and that is for pens and paper and ink."

"A request easily satisfied," said the abbot, "and I will also see that you are given the opportunity of a bath. A change of clothing too might be beneficial, although the only change we can offer you is the gown of one of our own novices."

The bath was the first François had had since leaving Saint-Generoux and, after the filth had been soaked off his wasted body, he was given a long girdled monk's gown and left alone in a tiny whitewashed cell, the only furniture being a hard pallet, a chair, and a small table. The simplicity of his cell was in tune with his mood. His surroundings were as sharp and clear-cut as he wished his mind to be and there he felt he would be able to write. The cleanliness, rest, and regular food would help to restore health to his body, although he knew that his hardships had finished him. His cough and the sudden fits of ague daily grew worse. The time might not be spared him to finish his poem and next day, awakened by the early morning bell, he eagerly took hold of his pen, tingling with excitement and curious anticipation of the poem he had been dreaming. Would it fade away like any other dream, leaving the dreamer mad and frantic, vainly grasping at the skirts of beauty? But he knew that his poem must be written. Failure was not possible and his mind revolved ponderously round that thought whilst he stared apprehensively at the empty sheets in front of him.

He saw himself sitting there in that monastery cell, a tiny speck on the earth's surface, worrying about a pattern of words that was called a poem whilst around him there moved millions of his fellow-men passing calmly about their lives, not caring whether he wrote his poem or not. Why allow himself to be seized with such a madness? Slowly he passed his hands over his shrunken body. He felt his arms and his legs; his face and his hair; his thin chest and belly; and finally he regarded his twisted hands, thinking that this bag of bones was called a man. And then looking back over

his life he realised how quickly it had passed. Gone were his hopes and his fears: he could expect nothing but dishonour for there was no place for him in the world, and his body would not last in it much longer, thanks to the loving care of his brother in Christ, Thibault d'Aussigny, Bishop of Orléans.

And François cried: "Thirty fleeting years have passed me by, thirty years have gone as nothing whilst I have drunken deeply of all my shames. Not a wise man or a fool am I, in spite of the maddening tortures I suffered at the hands of Thibault d'Aussigny. Can it be that man is truly a bishop, blessing people in the streets as he passes? Let me deny that he ever was bishop of mine, by God!"

And François wrote:

En l'an trentiesme de mon aage,
Que toutes mes hontes j'eus beues,
Ne du tout fol, ne du tout sage,
Non obstant maintes peines eues,
Lesquelles j'ay toutes recueues
Soubz la main Thibault d'Aussigny . . .
S'evesque il est, seignant les rues,
Qu'il soit le mien je le regny.

The words came easily from his pen and he knew that he was in spate and could write as he had never written before. "My imagination is flowing," he cried, "but how long will it last?" And fear of a sudden stagnation caused him to write himself out, so that he only had the strength to fall on his bed each night, wondering if inspiration would hold or the fountain run dry. But the fruitless periods were few. For the first time in his life François had control of himself, and a steady purpose which he intended to fulfil.

Mention of Thibault d'Aussigny had recalled his spleen against the prelate which must be worked out of his mind and, after the first verse, François went on for some time cursing the bishop, who evidently considered François Villon his serf and chattel to be kicked and knocked about as he felt inclined. "A whole summer lived on bread and water!" he cried. "May Thibault get his reward from God for that! Holy Church tells us to pray for our enemies and so I'll write him a Picard's prayer. There's a verse in the Psalter will do very well for his reverence of Orléans." And, with a grin of satisfaction, he mentioned the seventh verse which asked that his days might be few, and another take away his bishopric.

His anger had been worked out and, feeling the better for it, François considered how lucky he was ever to escape from such a man. "God evidently did not wish for my death at that time," said

François, "or else the good King of France would not have come my way." And loudly he praised God and Our Lady and Louis, King of France.

"That's enough of dedication," said François. "We'd best have a date to it: something in this style and so making an end to thanksgiving:

"This I am writing in the year fourteen hundred and sixty-one when the good King delivered me from the cruel prison at Meung, restoring me to life. And so I hold myself humbly grateful to him so long as breath is in my body."

Esript l'ay l'an soixante et ung,
Que le bon roy me delivra
De la dure prison de Mehun,
Et que vie me recouvra,
Dont suis, tant que mon cuer vivra,
Tenue vers luy m'humilier,
Ce que feray tant qu'il mouvra:
Bienfait ne se doit oublier.

"Now, I will give them an Apology for my life," said François, "explaining how I have found myself after many tears and groans and miseries which pricked sharper than needles and taught me more than did all the commentaries of Averroës on Aristotle."

Or est vray qu'après plains et pleurs
Et angoisseux gémissemens,
Après tristesses et douleurs,
Labeurs et griefz cheminemens,
Travail mes lubres sentemens,
Esguisez comme une pelote,
M'ouvrit plus que tous les commens
D'Averroys sur Aristote.

"Ah, how I regret the wasted years of my youth," he cried, "the youth I threw so carelessly away. And now comes old age knocking at the door and I know not how the young days went from me, whether on foot or on horse. Suddenly were they filched away and nothing is left to me."

Je plains le temps de ma jeunesse,
Ouquel j'ay plus qu'autre gallé
Jusques a l'entree de viellesse
Qui son parment m'a celé
Il ne s'en est a pié allé
N'a cheval: hélas! comment don?
Soudainement s'en est vollé
Et ne m'a laissé quelque don.

"So have the flying years gone by, leaving me high and dry. Sad and weary am I, blacker than a mulberry and poor as a church

mouse, without a single thing in the world to call my own. This is what neglect of duty and lusting after women can do for a man."

Allé s'en est, et je demeure,
 Povre de sens et de savoir,
 Triste, failly, plus noir que meure,
 Qui n'ay n'escus, rente, n'avoir;
 Des miens le mendre, je dis voir,
 De me desavouer s'avance,
 Oubliant naturel devoir,
 Par faulte d'ung peu de chevence.

"Oh! God, had I but studied in my young days and behaved myself, I should now have had my own house and a soft bed to sleep on. But what happened? Like a wayward child, I fled from school and now, as I sit here writing, my heart is like to break."

Hé! Dieu, se j'eusse étudié
 Ou temps de ma jeunesse folle,
 Et a bonnes meurs dédié,
 J'eusse maison et couche molle.
 Mais quoy? je fuyoie l'escolle,
 Comme fait le mauvais enfant.
 En escripvant ceste parolle,
 A peu que le cuer ne me fent.

"Life is short," he cried, "and my days are gone like strands of lighted tow.

"Where too are the elegant fellows I mixed with in days gone by, the carefree merry-makers, such good company both in word and deed? Some are stiff in death and of these there remains not a thing. May they be sheltered in Heaven and God help the rest of them!"

Ou sont les gracieux gallans
 Que je suivoye ou temps jadis,
 Si bien chantans, si bien parlans,
 Si plaisans en faiz et en dis?
 Les aucuns sont mors et roidis,
 D'eulx n'est il plus riens maintenant:
 Repos aient en paradis,
 Et Dieu saulve le demourant!

"And, God save us, yet others are become great lords and masters," he cried, "whilst more of them beg for the bread they see only in the windows. Others of these jolly brothers will have gotten themselves in the cloisters amongst the Celestins and the Carthusians. They'll be wearing heavy boots, as if they were oyster-fishers. See how varied is the fate of my old-time friends."

Et les autres sont devenus,
 Dieu mercy! grans seigneurs et maistres;
 Les autres mendient tous nus
 Et pain ne voient qu'aux fenestres;
 Les autres sont entrez en cloistres
 De Celestins et de Chartreux,
 Botez, housez com pescheurs d'oistres:
 Vez la l'estat divers d'entre eux.

"As for me, poor I was from my childhood and come from lowly stock. My father and his father before him (named Horace) had little money: poverty has made a mark on us all. On the graves of my ancestors, God rest their souls, there will be found neither crowns nor sceptres."

Povre je suis de ma jeunesse,
 De povre et de petite extrace.
 Mon pere n'ot oncq grant richesse,
 Ne son ayeul, nommé Orace.
 Povreté tous nous suit et trace.
 Sur les tombeaulx de mes ancestres
 Les ames desquelz Dieu embrasse!
 On n'y voit couronnes ne sceptres.

"My father is dead and may his soul be with God. I know that my mother too will die, a thing she daily expects, and that their son will not be allowed to stay. But these matters are of little account, for does not death come to all of us, rich and poor alike?

"I know that poor and rich, wise men and fools, priests and laymen, nobles, slaves, misers and spendthrifts, great and small, beautiful and ugly, ladies in fur-necked gowns, people of fashion with rich ornaments and high headdresses: each and every one of these will surely be swept away in Death's embrace."

Je congnois que povres et riches,
 Sages et folz, prestres et laiz,
 Nobles, villains, larges et chiches,
 Petiz et grans, et beaulx et laiz,
 Dames a rebrassez colletz,
 De quelconque condicion,
 Portans atours et bourreletz,
 Mort saisit sans exception.

"So died Paris and so Helen. Whoever it is that dies, dies in agony. His breath fails, his gall bursts over his heart, he sweats—God! such a sweat! And there is no one to help him in his inexorable torture: no child or brother or sister who would take his place."

Et meure Paris ou Helaine,
 Quiconques meurt, meurt a douleur
 Telle qu'il pert vent et alaine;
 Son fiel se creve sur son cuer,

ROGUE'S LUTE

Puis sue, Dieu scet quel sueur!
 Et n'est qui de ses maux l'alege:
 Car enfant n'a frere ne seur,
 Qui lors vouldist estre son pege.

"Death makes a man shiver and grow livid whilst the nose becomes a hook, the veins tight-strung, the flesh pluffy, and the nerves and joints twist and quiver. Can it be that this same terrible fate awaits the body of a woman: so smooth, so sweet, and so beautiful? Alas, indeed this must be so, else men and women would go to Heaven alive."

La mort le fait fremir, pallir,
 Le nez courber, les vaines tendre,
 Le col enfier, la chair mollir,
 Jointes et nerfs croistre et estendre.
 Corps femenin, qui tant es tendre,
 Poly, souef, si precieux,
 Te fauldra il ces maux attendre?
 Oy, ou tout vif aller es cieulx.

François stayed his pen and sat at gaze in a kind of horrified trance, thinking of the beautiful bodies of the women he had known, especially of Margot and the two girls in Poitou, for there it was that he had first realised the beauty of a woman's body. It was a beauty apart from the woman herself and outside the reach of her own mind, but all women had this decay in common; all the women who were living, all who had ever lived. Their beauty was doomed to crumble into decay and be forgotten. "As that snow on the fields will next year be forgotten," he said. "This fate overtakes even the most renowned and beautiful." And, taking up his pen again, he wrote the "Ballade of Dead Ladies": each phrase leading smoothly to the next, the lilt and the song having moved in his mind ever since he left the pit at Meung.

Dictes moy ou, n'en quel pays,
 Est Flora la belle Rommaine,
 Archipiades, ne Thaïs
 Qui fut sa cousine germaine;
 Echo parlant quant bruyt on maine
 Dessus riviere ou sus estan,
 Qui beaulté ot trop plus qu'humaine.
 Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan?

Ou est la tres sage Helloïs,
 Pour qui fut chastré et puis moyne
 Pierre Esbaillart a Saint Denis?
 Pour son amour ot cest essoyne.
 Semblablement, ou est le royne
 Qui commanda que Buridan
 Fust geté en ung sac en Saine?
 Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan?

La royne Blanche comme lis
 Qui chantoit a voix de seraine,
 Berte au grant pié, Bietris, Alis
 Haremburgis qui tint le Maine,
 Et Jehanne la bonne Lorraine
 Qu'Englois brulerent a Rouan;
 Ou sont ilz, ou, Vierge souveraine?
 Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan?

Prince, n'enquerez de sepmaine
 Ou elles sont, ne de cest an,
 Que ce reffrain ne vous remaine:
 Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan?

The re-reading of the poem exhilarated François and, unable to keep still, he rushed out of his cell and paced the cloisters amongst the startled monks. "The first time he has come amongst us," they said, and chattered with excitement, wondering if they were to witness a miracle of conversion. But François did not see the monks. He thought only of the lines he had written and repeated them to himself over and over again with all the urgency of a prayer, loving the gentle mournful sound of them, like the lap of water at the river's edge.

"A man's talent must strike the right subject," François said. "It is only twice or thrice in a man's life that he can hope to discover the combination within himself but surely this has come to me now. Will it happen again in the short time left to me?"

Quickly he returned to his cell and tried to recapture the mood in a poem he called the "Ballade of Dead Lords." It was well enough in its way but he knew that his inspiration had already faded. A break in concentration was necessary and he inserted the poem he had written whilst in Saint-Generoux, in which he told his memories of the old woman in Paris as she sat keening over the fire, bemoaning her lost youth and beauty. And, returning to his creation, he added a short poem describing the advice such a woman would give the girls of Paris, entreating them to get all they could out of men whilst they were able, for their day would pass.

In my own experience, he thought, not many of them need that advice. It's in the nature of women to prey on men and love of them is the devil. For the giving of a single pleasure they bring in their trail a thousand sorrows, and he is a happy man who has nothing to do with them. One of them was nearly the death of me. A spiteful devil if ever there was one. That accursed Catherine.

The blood rose to his head as it always did when he thought of her green eyes, and so he wrote of his bondage and the indignities and the bewitchment he had suffered at her hands, explaining how she had so bemused him that she could get him to believe that black

was white or a fat abbot an innocent novice. Thus his indignities had become so famous that he was once known as the despised and rejected lover.

"But why am I worrying?" he cried. "Surely by now I've had my lesson and gotten a little sense?"

"Let me say that I renounce all loves and defy them with blood and fire. They've dragged me here to the brink of death and cared not a brass farthing. I've shoved my hurdy-gurdy under the seat and if ever I walked with lovers, or numbered myself amongst them, I hereby swear that it will never happen again!"

Je regnie Amours et despite;
Je deffie a feu et a sang.
Mort par elles me precipite,
Et ne leur en chault pas d'ung blanc.
Ma vielle ay mys soubz le banc;
Amans je ne suyvray jamais:
Se jadis je fus de leur ranc,
Je desclare que n'en suis mais.

"I've flung my plume into the wind. From now on I'm free to speak against love as I wish. And if any fool questions and asks how I dare speak of women in this way, let him take this for answer: 'A dying man may speak as he feels!'"

Car j'ay mis le plumail au vent:
Or le suyve qui a attente;
De ce me tais doresnavant,
Car poursuivre vueil mon entente.
Et s'aucun m'interroge ou tente
Comment d'Amours j'ose mesdire
Cette parolle le contente:
"Qui meurt a ses loix de tout dire."

"A dying man sure enough," cried François. "A young man of thirty but the shadow of death is over me, thanks to the tortures I suffered at Meung." And with the bit once more between his teeth he was off again, cursing the pious Bishop of Orléans. He knew that the balance of his poem was thereby in peril but they were in front of his eyes: the unctuous bishop, his cruel assistant, the monk Plaisance, and the sly torturer, Robert of Orléans. "Not that I wish the dear bishop any harm," said François. "O no, surely not! Nor his official, who is such an elegant Christian character. And as for little master Robert, with his gags and his irons and his pincers—Lord, I love them all, the whole bunch of them, as much as God loves a Lombard!"

He found that he was grinding his teeth in impotent rage and that his whole body shook with fury: a dangerous state for a man

in his physical condition and, deliberately forcing his mind away from Meung, he told himself that he had not yet started the versifying will and last testament he had intended. A clerk was necessary to take down any will, and summoning an imaginary clerk he called Frémin to his side, and ordering him to take paper and pens and ink, he proceeded with his mock will as he had in the poem written when he left Paris. His former friends were not forgotten and he also gave his legacies to the higher personages he had known or heard of. His fancy was allowed full rein and he enjoyed the easy writing of these jokes.

Women had pushed themselves into his mind again and, sitting back in his chair, he shut his eyes and imagined the pretty faces chattering under their hoods as he had seen them so many times in the churches of Paris, retailing the latest scandal with the altar and the stern face of the priest as background to their talk.

"Come, I beg you, take a peep at them seated in twos and threes on the hem of their gowns, even in cathedrals and churches. Draw a little nearer and make no sound. You will hear wiser judgments than any delivered by Macrobus. Listen! Can you catch a tiny whisper? You may be sure it's well worth the hearing."

Regarde m'en deux, trois, assises
Sur le bas du ply de leurs robes,
En ces moustiers, en ces eglises;
Tire toy pres, et ne te hobes;
Tu trouveras la que Macrobes
Oncques ne fist tels jugemens.
Entens; quelque chose en desrobes:
Ce sont tres beaulx enseignemens!

He returned to the game of making mock bequests until he realised that he was beginning to write for the sake of writing. "It's time I was thinking of the end," he said, "the end of my poem and the end of my life."

The mood had come upon him once again and he saw in his mind's eye the great Cemetery of the Innocents where he and his friends had often forgathered: the great gates, the dark trees, the swelling mounds of the graves: and so he bequeathed his spectacles to the hospital for the three hundred blind men near the Louvre so that they could pick out the good men from the bad in the Innocents' Cemetery.

"There is no laughter or joking," he cried. "What good has life done those men who have slept in rich beds, drunk their fill of wine, revelled and feasted and danced and taken their pleasure at every hour of the day? All such joys fade away and only the guilt remains."

Icy n'y a ne ris ne jeu.
 Que leur vault avoir eu chevances,
 N'en grans lis de parement jeu,
 Engloutir vins en grosses pances,
 Mener joye, festes et dances,
 Et de ce prest estre a toute heure?
 Toutes faillent telles plaisances,
 Et la coulpe si en demeure.

No, it certainly does not much matter who they were, he thought. The respectable merchant and his wife prided themselves on their character and virtue and considered the chimney-sweep and his wife in the next street as beings from a different world. But now the merchant's wife sleeps alongside the chimney-sweep and her husband makes no complaint. How little are we and what words do we make much of: words like good and evil govern our lives. Those words are like empty echoes.

"For I can remember how those skulls, the thousands of skulls, were piled together in those charnel-houses, skulls of men high in the King's Council or the skulls of street porters. I have no way of telling one from the other: whether bishops or lamplighters they all look alike to me."

Quant je considere ces testes
 Entassees en ces charniers,
 Tous furent maistres des Requestes,
 Au moins de la Chambre aux Deniers,
 Ou tous furent portepanniens:
 Autant puis l'ung que l'autre dire,
 Car d'evesques ou lanterniers
 Je n'y congnois riens a redire.

"And those men who lean together in such close contact stood one against the other in their lives, for some were rulers and the others servile and fearful of their lords, but now look at them gathered together pell-mell in one heap. Their lordships have been ravished and there are no such names as master and servant."

Et icelles qui s'enclinoient
 Unes contre autre en leurs vies,
 Desquelles les unes regnoient
 Des autres craintes et servies,
 La les voy toutes assouvies,
 Ensemble en ung tas, peslemesle.
 Seigneuries leur sont ravies;
 Clerc ne maistre ne s'y appelle.

"Well, there they are, all dead. God may have mercy on their souls, but their bodies are rotting even though they have been great lords and ladies who were carefully fattened on cream and

frumenty and rice: but in feeding themselves, they came only to feed the worms. Much do they care now for frivolity and laughter. May sweet Jesus absolve them all!"

Or sont ilz mors, Dieu ait leurs ames!
 Quant est des corps, ilz sont pourris.
 Aient esté seigneurs ou dames,
 Souef et tendrement nourris
 De cresseme, fromentee or riz,
 Leurs os sont declinez en pouldre
 Auxquels ne chault d'esbatz ne ris.
 Plaise au doux Jhesus les absouldre!

François followed this with a few more bequests and then gave detailed instructions for his own funeral. And in the same mood of cool, sweet melancholy he wrote his own Epitaph, which pleased his ear and made a fitting end to the poem:

Cy gist et dort en ce sollier,
 Qu'amours occist de son raillon,
 Ung povre petit escollier,
 Qui fut nommé François Villon.
 Oncques de terre n'or sillon.
 Il donna tout, chascun, le scet:
 Tables, tresteaulex, pain, corbeillon.
 Amans, dictes en ce verset:

Repos eternal donne a cil,
 Sire, et clarté perpetuelle,
 Qui vaillant plat ni escuelle
 N'eut oncques, n'ung brain de percil.
 Il fut rez, chief, barbe et sourcil,
 Comme ung navet qu'on ret ou pelle,
 Repos eternal donne a cil.

CHAPTER II

WHEN the poem was finished, François found the monks busy at work in the gardens and fields of the monastery, for the winter frosts had come out of the ground and it was near the end of April. More than four months had been spent in the writing, and as François, blinking his eyes in the unaccustomed light of spring, watched the monks bent over their spades he fretted with impatience. How his lines would sound to the ear when read aloud was the real test, and to make these God-obsessed men understand the importance of his own obsession would be impossible: they would look at him with the kindly, self-contained glance such men reserve for

enthusiasms that seem to have no connection with God as they know Him. But his uncle was a different type, especially do men of religion have their differences, and a trip to Paris would have to be risked, for François knew that the old man in the cloister of Saint-Benoît was his only possible listener.

The monks told him that some farm-carts went daily with produce to Paris, and although they missed the University quarter, their destination being the markets of the Halles quarter in the town on the Right Bank, their wheels would save his legs some five miles of walking. François immediately sought out the abbot, saying that he wished to see his uncle, the canon, and seeking permission to ride in one of the carts: a request that was granted somewhat grudgingly for the next morning.

Although they were to set out at first light, François was up some time before and, at the first knock on his cell door, was ready to follow the monk down the long whitewashed corridors. This monk was not the driver, but he took François outside and showed him the waiting cart with the driver hunched over the driving seat. This brother did not even return Villon's greeting but pointed silently with the driving whip over his shoulder, to indicate that he was to take his seat in the body of the cart. François seated himself uncomfortably on the load of damp spring greens, drawing his monk's gown round him, which, although coarse, was fortunately thick, and the cart jogged away from the monastery. Soon they had left the surrounding fringe of cottages and were in the open country.

The driver still did not speak but François had no need of words: he was on his way back to Paris and he could feel the comforting bulge of his manuscript-poem that he had strapped for safety to his body.

They jogged along the rough roads for about an hour, François cramped and damp and shaken, and then, at a crossroad, the monk turned his horse to the right and pointed with his whip down the left-hand track. François understood that it was there the cart turned off to find a ferry or a bridge across the Seine above Paris, so that it could avoid the crowded streets and the cobblestones, never good for the stoutest axle. He knew that they stood almost on the hills lipping and overtopping Paris: the cart could drop straight down to the Gate of Saint-Jacques and reach its destination by way of the rue Saint-Jacques, the Little Bridge, the rue de la Juiverie in the Cité, the Bridge of Notre-Dame, and the rue Saint-Martin in the town. But he would ask no favours of so surly a brother and, with an abrupt wave of the hand, he slipped from the cart and made off along the ascending road.

He walked briskly to restore the circulation in his legs and the dampness in his gown struck less chilly, but soon he had to slacken pace. Although the hill was not steep, it was too much for his little strength.

The day was rapidly lightening, and just as he reached the brow of the hill the sun reared itself up majestically, scattering the morning haze. Sight of the town from that aspect brought even François to a dead stop, little given as he was to noticing such things.

He stood on the low line of hills that border Paris like the rim of a bowl and, at his feet, the town was set in a great, rolling plain of green fields, vineyards, and many varied crop-lands. The slopes of the hills, plentifully sprinkled with windmills and handsome villages, ran gently down to the city walls. Through this plain, like a greenish, multicoloured serpent, ran the River Seine, and in Mother Seine herself was the oldest part of the capital, the Island of the Cité, from which the rest had expanded. From that height, the Island looked more than ever like a great ship, stuck in the mud and run aground near the centre of the river, with its bridges as mooring-ropes.

On either side the river were the other two burghs within the city walls. Immediately below François, on the Left Bank, was the compact mass of the University quarter, with its forty-two colleges and many churches and, on the far bank, the vast semicircle of the town. Encircling the whole was the wall of Philip Augustus, a forbidding, grey line, with thriving suburbs sprawling outwards from its shadow.

But Villon's impression of the town was not orderly. His mind was dazzled and uplifted by that amazing view of upreaching pinnacles, spires, roofs, towers, chimneys, bridges, tortuous streets, squares, and green gardens. Better than any showman at the Fair of Saint-Germain, the sun pointed out the beauties with its delicate fingers; stressing the tracery of a spire, the filigree of close-leaning towers and steeples, the sharp-pointed roofs, the pepper-pot turrets suspended outside the walls, or the delicate spires of countless churches. The town had an ethereal appearance and François could only stand silently and wonder at its unexpected beauty, displayed before him like a talisman.

Many centuries and the toil of millions of sweating bodies had been taken up in the building. The pieces of it, too, had been conceived by thousands of different designers. These men, workmen and designers alike, had been mean, despicable, cruel, perverse, their aspect little removed from the animals. Yet the work of these creatures had produced a living art that was beautiful and also, miracle of miracles, homogeneous. Men separated by a hundred,

fifty, even ten years in time were often completely different in taste and outlook from each other. No one man had been able to leave even the superficial imprint of his mind to stamp on the whole and serve as an integrating influence. Yet there was this miraculous continuity. How came this beauty from such unworthy ants? For Paris was a living poem, as much a poem as the one he had just written. How did these flowers of beauty come to grow on the dunghill of mankind?

He stood pondering this question and then, as if to underline it, he heard the chiming of bells down below. For a few seconds it was a solitary chime but that was joined immediately by peals from all over the town. Joyously the bells threw their tumbling liquid notes up at François: now rollicking in hasty frolic, now leaning against each other in languid dalliance, seeming to toss their pleasure from one to the other as negligently as François had seen skilled tennis players flick the ball in practice.

He stood listening to the abandoned clamour, nodding his head in pleasure. Then he walked eagerly down the slope towards the town, a gladness in his heart so great that he felt it to be unreasonable.

François knew that he was near Gentilly and soon he saw its round and its square tower on his left. He struck across the fields behind some farm-buildings and over a road until he reached the stream that looped round behind the monastery of the Cordeliers. The sun was beginning to warm the air and the warm, damp smell of spring and the gladness worked so strangely on his mind that he squatted on his heels by the stream, literally hugging his knees in sheer grinning pleasure. He wondered if there was after all some years of life left in his wasted body, feeling the warm flesh and the bone beneath his fingers. Idly he began to toss white pebbles in the water with a backward flick of the wrist, noticing the darting fishes and the drooping beauty of the willows at the water's edge. Then, leaning forward to watch a dragonfly, he caught the reflection of his own face in the water. Still the same haggard, sardonic countenance, nothing would alter that! And he got quickly to his feet to continue his journey.

But nothing could depress him for long that day and he swung across the field and over another plank bridging the stream. For the first time in his life he felt an affinity with natural things. At that moment, he understood that all life on this earth is the same life: only the forms of it are different.

On the other side of the stream, he stood contemplating the community of the Cordeliers. Immediately on his right was the high wall of the monastery, but above it the great spire of the chapel,

with its tall cross, pierced the blue sky. François looked up at the cross, noticing the white flecks of cloud racing behind it, and remembered how he had been used to gibe at these communities of friars: the Cordeliers and the Jacobins, the Augustins and the Carmes. Always he had believed them to be stuffing their bellies, debauching girls, and generally breaking their own rules.

"But flesh is weak, don't I know it," he said, out of his sudden gentleness, "and at least they have or had at some time a vision in their minds of what the life of a man could be."

François smiled at his own tolerance, remembering that it was not shared by the regular clergy, and there came haphazard into his mind a tale that had once been told of the enmity between these men of religion who worshipped the same God. The parish priests, with more truth than wisdom, once complained to the brothers, saying: "You are sought out as confessors. The people run to hear your sermons. You take away from us the care of the dying. Since you have been on the hunt, they pay us tithes only grudgingly." The Mendicants had made full use of such a golden opportunity. "Prove yourselves worthy to hear confessions," they answered, "and the people will have recourse to your offices. Be eloquent and you will not lack listeners for your sermons. As for the other, each one of us is surely free to get himself buried where he wishes, however poor he may be!"

François smiled quietly to himself at the memory of this altercation and the priestly thunder rumbling across the Sorbonne and the Hill of Sainte-Geneviève: he was so preoccupied that he failed to notice a monk come out of the monastery and walk towards the stream, carrying a rod under his arm. But the monk stood still until François became aware of him, a short, rotund, bald-headed man with merry, brown, kindly eyes, a serene peace behind them: the two stared intently at each other and a wave of friendliness passed between them.

"You are happy, brother!" declared the monk.

"For the moment, I am," answered François, "the first time for many years, almost the first time in my life."

"The length of such a moment is with God," continued the brother. "Perhaps the beauty of our community and the perfect day and the stream curving in such a pointless loop in our meadow have something to do with it?"

"Indeed, I believe they have," answered François. "And when you speak of a perfect day, do you mean that it will be so until the sun becomes too hot for the lazy carp to rise to the bait?"

"Ah, I see you know something of our gentle art," said the brother, glancing eagerly towards the stream. "We have golden

carp which will, I promise you, be flirting at the hook within ten minutes of making your first cast. A happy man is to me a renewal of faith, yet he is not so easily come by, and I should be pleased to have your company, it will be no trouble at all to fetch a spare rod I have——”

“My uncle, a canon of Saint-Benoît, first taught me how to make a cast at Argenteuil,” answered François. “We spent many a quiet happy hour amongst the damp reeds, but we have not seen each other for five years and I am hurrying to throw myself into his arms.”

“Ah, the reason for your happiness is now apparent,” said the monk. “You have doubtless been on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and I will not tempt you from your good uncle. But if you are passing this way later in the day call in for the carp I will reserve for you: it will eat well even in a Paris cloister, so long as your uncle does not know it was caught by one of the Mendicants! Ask at the gate for Brother Ambroise.”

And, with his quick friendly smile, the monk passed on to the stream, leaving François with a pleased warm glow in his mind that any man could wish for his company.

That meeting gave François confidence and he quickly set off down the rue des Cordeliers that skirted the monastery. The houses of the community formed the first real street of Paris in that direction and, striding quickly down the hill past the hospital, François turned into the long street called Saint-Marcel, which led directly to the Gate of Bordelle. This was the quarter where lived the dyers, the unpleasant smell of the dye assailed his nostrils; it was too the home of the tombstone-makers but, refusing to think of death in connection with his uncle or to have his confidence destroyed, François shut his mind to everything but the fact that he was almost within the shadow of Paris.

Then he saw the Gate of Bordelle. A dozen or so tall houses clustered in front of the moat and on the bridge that crossed it, but the gate towered high above them. The forbidding grey masonry of that crenellated façade took François in the pit of the stomach: his immediate reaction was to turn hurriedly to the right, following the line of the city wall on his left. What would have happened to all those merry friends of his? Regnier de Montigny he knew was dead and there was usually a dead man to pass outside every gate in Paris, hanging in chains.

He stopped to watch a man on the moat-bank taking aim with a crossbow at a bird. The bird hurtled down, transfixed, into the moat, and the marksman, cursing his luck, began to look around for a boat. The familiar sight soothed Villon's nerves: he told himself

that he had to get into Paris and that he ran little risk wearing a monk's gown. A noisy band of archers passed him and, turning after them, François passed through the gate behind them, with bowed head as if deep in meditation.

The thing he had feared was over in a moment. He raised his head with a sigh of relief and passed down the rue Bordelle, leaving the huge pile of the ancient Abbey of Sainte-Genève on his left.

Then, with a quicker pulse, he passed down the Hill of Sainte-Genève until he came to the College of Navarre on the right. There he could not resist turning off his course to look at the college and the house of Robert de Saint-Simon, but one glance was enough: memory of the college robbery frightened him again and he quickly plunged into the twisting, narrow streets of the quarter. These streets had been made to follow the paths of what had previously been cultivated fields: they twisted and turned without much order or logic and the whole quarter fell away from the Hill of Sainte-Genève right down across the University to the Seine. He soon reached the rue Saint-Jacques by way of the rue des Anglais, rue Saint-Victor, and rue des Noyers.

And so he stood at last in the great street of Saint-Jacques, thinking that any moment comes to a man so long as he has the patience to wait. For five years he had thought of that street cutting across the quarter like a ruler, thought of it in towns and taverns and prison cells and a dungeon pit, thought of it until he had almost come to believe that it did not exist. And then he found himself with the chevet of the little church and the red door of his uncle's house in the cloisters under his eyes, unmistakably the same as they had always been. All he had to do was to cross the road and knock at the door.

But an unexpected feeling of shyness came over him. It was not the fear he had had outside the gate of the town but rather a reluctance to face his uncle's mild glance. The marked absence of verbal censure would be a reproof in itself but if worry had aged his uncle immeasurably . . .

François stood at the junction of the rue des Noyers and the rue Saint-Jacques and, staring undecidedly for a moment at the beautiful chapel of Saint-Yves on the corner, he turned abruptly to his left down the rue Saint-Jacques towards the Gate of Saint-Jacques, leaving the cloister of Saint-Benoît and the Sorbonne on the right-hand side of the street. On the left-hand side, almost opposite the Church of the Mathurins, was the Mule tavern where Colin had first picked him up so many years before. It seemed a lifetime but, with something of a shock, he realised that it was only a matter of ten years or so. The self-confident young student in the Mule

that evening had nothing in common that he could see with the broken tramp who had crawled to a monastery in order to set down a poem.

He would have expected thoughts of his old friends to go on darkening his mind, but instead he was surprised to find that his earlier pleasure in life came back to him: he was seeing Paris with a new and fuller eye, taking delight in everything he saw. Even the people he passed seemed more kindly-looking than those in the country, despite the fact that most of them were absentminded Sorbonnical doctors, pert scholars, or stately burgesses.

The majestic line of the colleges of the Sorbonne, a uniform and clean design, ran practically the whole right-hand side of the street. But there was nothing uniform about the side of the street along which he was walking. The houses were mostly tall and narrow, having that much in common, but their differing shapes jostled each other haphazardly. Each storey stuck out beyond the one beneath it and the beams of every house, whether they could be seen from the street or not, were decorated with carvings. Their fronts presented an endless zigzag of crazy gables, sometimes interrupted by the porch of a chapel, and Villon's eye was especially caught by the occasional stained-glass windows, the coloured roof-tiles, and the carvings on the wooden beams of the lower storeys. Every inch of these was covered with representations of men and animals, known either in fact, classic mythology, or the fable of the artist's mind, carved with an infinite care of loving detail. The man was wasting his time, ten to one the purchaser would neither know nor care how much labour had been put into the carving; he would not give them two glances in a year or pay one copper piece more on the price. Yet all these craftsmen took this useless joy in their work.

And then François understood the love of beauty shown by men in these common things. His mind came on a full understanding of the truth at which it had been probing on the hill-side above Paris: he saw that these men had, as he had had at that moment, an apprehension in their minds that the town was a living, beautiful thing. They had paid the only tribute they could pay by attempting to add to its beauty.

Their feeling was vague, they paid homage almost instinctively, but pay it they did, even if it meant the loss of money or health, or even life. For François too the way had been hard and long and roundabout. Before that, a church was to him just a church and a house merely a place that was comfortable or not, where one got a drink or a girl or bored stiff by a goat-bearded old pedant. But his eyes had now been opened: that day in the rue Saint-Jacques he saw that such things could have a spiritual significance, showing that

there is some saving grace in man, a continuity in his spirit. The long poem François had composed in the monastery had set forth the transience of man's life; the swift decay of his body; the tiny speck that he is in space and time and eternity. That was true enough but, for the first time in his life, François understood that that might not be the whole story.

Men are cruel, mean, and wanton, true enough. They do things to each other, especially in the name of love and progress and humanity, that no beast would do to his own kind. In hundreds of years they crawl forward only a minute distance from savagery and then revert at the slightest excuse. But in them there is still this spark of beauty, this unreasoning love of beautiful things. Those carvers of wood, those poets of stone: in them, deep down, was something articulate but faint and stifled, perhaps the imprint of a lost God or maybe a God slowly coming to full stature. Man endures because of this, almost in spite of himself.

And François knew that his life had been a good example of unawareness; a conflict between material lusting after fleshpots and the reasonable life of the spirit. He wondered if he would ever come to express this understanding in his poetry but, unsentimental as ever, he remembered his racked body and knew that there was probably no time or room in the world for him to live a fuller, deeper life.

He realised that he had come to a halt opposite the monastery of the Jacobins by the Gate of Saint-Jacques, and then he was brought completely out of his abstraction by whoops and cries from the gate itself: a troop of little urchins screaming insults at a couple of harlots, who wore the hennin perched high on their heads. This was an extravagant form of headgear that François knew had often been denounced from the pulpit. But the organised zeal of the children was inexplicable until François noticed that they ran to a friar in the rear for advice and encouragement: money passed between them and, as a result, stones began to be thrown as well as words. The harlots flushed crimson but all they could do was to hurry towards the Little Bridge, the urchins trotting at their heels, whilst the friar's long legs easily kept pace with his victims. He was a wild-eyed man, waving gaunt arms, with his gown rolled up to the elbows, and catching Villon's glance he cried out that God chose unworthy instruments to work His will . . .

The speed of their progress soon took him out of hearing, although he continued to shout over his shoulder, and François, with a grin, followed them back to Saint-Benoît, saying that he had had enough of dreams and abstractions, it was time he presented himself to his uncle.

But he was still hovering uncertainly on the cobblestones when the door of his uncle's house opened and Marthe looked anxiously up and down the street. She had probably forgotten the mustard and was seeking a small boy to run the errand for her. François began to walk towards the old woman. She recognised him at once, that he knew by the sudden movement of her hand to her breasts, and as he walked unsteadily on he realised that his troubles would be ended if news of his coming had reached the Provost of Paris and the house was watched. If she cried out, or showed alarm or pleasure, he would feel a hand on his shoulder and a pike pressed into his side . . .

But the old woman's wit was as keen as ever and she cried out sharply for all to hear, asking why he was late. "Ah, there you are, Brother Jacques," she cried. "So you've come at last, and about time, too, for the master has been expecting you this hour past. Come inside now you are here, come inside, man!"

Marthe held the door open for him and, once inside, she drew the bolts fast behind and stood with her back to the door, staring at him. She had not altered in the least: still the same Breton face with its rosy apple-hard cheeks, the nutcracker nose and chin, and the lively dark eyes set in a network of wrinkles. François stood uneasily beneath her scrutiny, wondering what sort of a reception her tongue would give him. He knew that anybody who hurt her master had committed the sin against the Holy Ghost. But she was near to tears herself.

"My poor boy, what have you been doing to yourself?" she cried. And coming forward she put her hands on his shoulders, pulling him towards her, and drew the hood from his face.

"Why, François, the bones are sticking out through this gown of yours," she cried, "and your face is thin as a rake! We must see about fattening you up with good food, although by rights you shouldn't be here at all. But it's no use crying over spilt milk and, now you are here, I'll warn the master."

He could find no words to answer her and she stood fascinated by the change in him, tears in her eyes, and then, suddenly kissing her master's boy on the forehead, she turned away to Guillaume's study.

François followed close behind her, and when he reached the threshold of the room the old man had just got to his feet, taking the spectacles off his nose with a shaking hand.

"Who is it, who is it, Marthe?" he cried. "I heard voices and you know that each time I hear a voice in the house, I hope —"

But François was fighting against the emotion that was over-

powering them all and tried to walk casually into the room from the shadow of the passage.

"Well, uncle, here I am at last," he said, walking over to the fire and warming his hands. "The Prodigal Son returned, and although I haven't been minding pigs, it's the only form of degradation I have escaped."

He turned, and catching the look on the priest's face he made no further attempt to pass the moment off lightly but went down on his knees to receive his uncle's blessing.

"François, François, thanks be to the Blessed Mary and to our holy Saint Benoît!" the canon whispered at last. "Returned after all these years and in a monk's gown!"

François raised his head and the two men stared at each other. François saw that his uncle had become thinner and his hair was whiter but otherwise he had not changed, for the life of a cloister leaves no mark, but in the eyes of the priest there was dawning horror at the change in his nephew's appearance.

"You are in danger here, François!" Guillaume muttered, still not taking his eyes from his nephew's face.

"I know that, uncle, but I had to come," answered François. "I could wait no longer."

Silence fell between them and Guillaume, turning to Marthe with a smile, said she must do her best to prepare a supper worthy of the occasion. When she had gone out to her kitchen the canon put his arm round François and drew him to the fireside, so that they sat facing each other as they had been used to do when the schools and Aristotle were under discussion.

"And the monk's gown?" Guillaume asked. "Does that mean you have gone into the cloister after all and found God?"

But François was in too emotional a state to explain himself with an ordered account of his own sufferings and he flung himself on the rug at his uncle's side, asking if a man could find God and yet have nothing to do with the priests and churches.

"When you speak of God," he cried, "is it happiness and fulfilment you mean?"

"Slowly, François, slowly!" said Guillaume. "I would hear how you have been living these five years. After your first letter sent to me by a strange messenger in June, fourteen hundred and fifty-seven, I heard nothing from you until a woman brought your message four months ago. You can understand how that relieved my mind. I had come to believe you dead and daily prayed that I too might be taken. I set about obtaining the King's pardon but you know that these affairs take time, although I am expecting success any day now. There is a new provost in Paris, your old

friend Robert d'Estouteville being deposed, and the new official is a hard man. That is why it is so dangerous for you to be here. But an old priest never gets any visitors of note. So much have I withdrawn from society that the rumour has gone round that I am a little mad. And, now that you are here, it will do no harm to stay awhile and tell me your adventures."

"How I have been living does not matter," cried François. "At the end, I came to forget how I was living. It's what I've done that's important. I have written a poem."

"Written a poem!" said Guillaume. "Why, that's nothing new!"

"But this one is different from any other I have written," answered François, "and it is important that you should understand the difference. I suffered for my sins, O, I suffered in every way possible, mentally and physically. There was the anguish of being cut off from you and the town I loved, with the added torment of knowing that I alone was to blame. The opportunities I had thrown away were constantly rising in accusation against me like lawyers in a court of law. Then I was in fear of my life. A hunted man, I fled all over France, not knowing whether the gibbet in the next town or village I came across would hold my dangling body for the birds to peck. Above all, I was lonely, and often believed and almost hoped that the loneliness would drive me mad. A madman must have many companions. Of the physical pain, there is no need to speak. That has left its mark for all to see, but towards the end I began to forget myself, and my hardships and the danger I was in. I do not know whether every man reaches a point when suffering sharpens his mind but I became obsessed with thoughts that previously had only come to me casually. I meditated the nature of man and his lot in this world. What could I say of myself or any man? Were we not all very much alike? A fly I could make out by its blackness in milk, but how was I to judge a princess from a harlot when both were dead? The littleness of man and his transitory life were ever in my mind. I was like a man possessed, and so came to write my thoughts in ecstasy of imagination, and behind the words I wrote were the hardships I had endured since leaving Paris. The priests claim that a man reaches God through suffering. My mind was purged in the same way and it happened that, when I wrote, something drove me on in an agony of creation and, in that agony, I found a single purpose and happiness for the first time in my life."

Guillaume was amazed that his nephew should come back broken in body but full of this ecstatic obsession. Like a man who has seen the face of God, the priest thought: and he asked François

to read the poem. But the words were a meaningless jumble to Guillaume, who found himself brooding on the change in his nephew's appearance. The priest could not keep his eyes from the thin, wasted body with its protruding bones; the gaunt, haggard face with the nose, always prominent, grotesque in its apparent size now that the other features had fallen in; the hands, arms, and legs, bent and twitching uncertainly; the large, staring, unnaturally brilliant eyes, black in a dead-white face; the frequent spitting of blood, accompanied by a hacking cough, which even interrupted the reading on which François was so intent. A man who looks very near the grave: the thought crossed Guillaume's mind involuntarily but, although he had to admit its truth, the canon also felt that François had found himself and maybe God. There was a feverish happiness about the boy that Guillaume had never seen before in any other man. Is it the man or the happiness that is feverish? he thought.

But his speculations were diverted and his attention caught by a line of the poem François was reading, and immediately he was caught up in the rhythm of the poem, which he followed intently, with growing amazement. He had expected something slap-dash, brilliant in patches, but there was a solemn tone, a deep rhythm to the writing, which showed his nephew's awareness of the beauty he was creating. Poetry such as that was not thrown off carelessly. Until the cadences of the "Ballade of Dead Ladies" had been read Guillaume kept quiet, but then he could no longer be still.

"This is great poetry, François," he cried, "as great as any I have read, and completely outshines any poet of this age."

"Do you mean that?" said François. "You're not speaking out of your wish to please a sick man?"

"Of course not, François, and you must know that it is great."

"There's more to come," answered François. And he went on reading the poem until Marthe brought in the supper-tray. They ate the stuffed goose somewhat absentmindedly, without the regard its succulence deserved, and quickly returned to the poem. The reading was finished at sunset and, as François let the sheets drop to his knee, Guillaume fell to speaking of the beauty and rhythm of his verse, of its vigour and his infallible ear for the right word.

"A great poem has been written!" the priest concluded. "Reality has been brought to our faded literature and it is true that, after all, the name of Villon will go down to posterity, although you will never be a cardinal! Do you remember my ambition for you to wear the scarlet hat, and your mother too, the good woman who has lived uncomplaining all these years in the belief that her son had gone on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land?"

"You kept the truth from her then?" said François.

"How could I cause her pain? Now she will have her so poem to offer the Holy Mary and how that will please her!"

But the canon could not talk of others at that moment a returned to consideration of the miracle he had witnessed: t a man could be a thief and informer of thieves, a lecherous run after women, almost a murderer, and yet come to such greatn as that. His premonition all those years back that God wanted h to adopt François had been correct. There was rhythm in t ways of God, even as in the magnificent godlike rhythm of Franç Villon's poem. And to the priest this was yet another sign God's omnipotence.

Their gossip went on into the small hours, but when Franç took his candle upstairs to his own little room he felt that maybe had been living on the heights too much that day. Perhaps aft all a great deal of fuss had been made about nothing: but when l slipped into bed, and felt the cool lavender-scented sheets again his roughened flesh, he was able to let himself sink down with sigh of relief, knowing that a measure of peace and comfort w his at last.

CHAPTER III

BUT now that François was in the way of visiting Saint-Benoît Guillaume saw that his visits would become more and mor frequent. It was certain that such a well-known man would b recognised sooner or later, and so the canon suggested that hi nephew should stay there in hiding whilst every possible effort wa made to obtain the King's pardon. François was delighted wit the suggestion, saying that he would never leave the house or pu aside his monk's gown or take the slightest risk. A note of thank was therefore sent to the abbot with the intimation that his gues would not be returning, and François once again found himsel sheltered by the walls of Saint-Benoît; his days of vagrancy ended.

In the quiet days that followed he could not forget his sufferings and would often wake at night screaming with fright, but Guillaume never mentioned these outbursts and gradually he grew out of them. The peace and the security of the cloister had their effect, a measure of tranquillity was restored to his broken body, and that summer of 1462 was lived in thankful seclusion. He did not find it difficult to shun the streets of Paris. They were melancholy with reminders

of his dead or outlawed friends and his own lost youth, so that he was only happy when working about the house or in Marthe's kitchen or sitting with Guillaume in his study. Their talk was not of the last five years, for Guillaume instinctively avoided the subject, and often they went back ten years to speak of the schools and times past, but most often the talk was of a new poet called Villon.

In November of the same year, word was brought to Guillaume that François had been recognised making his way down the rue Saint-Jacques and thrown into the Petit-Châtelet. But earlier that morning a messenger had called at Saint-Benoît bearing the pardon for François, a comprehensive pardon covering both the robbery at Navarre and the subsequent flight from justice, and Guillaume set out to see his old friend, Laurence de Poutrel, who would be glad to help now that Guillaume had agreed to pay back the money stolen from the College of Navarre.

The lawyer's word worked like magic and, next day, François was back in the house, staring dazedly about him, for he had not expected any release. The memory of the night in prison pressed down on his mind and he told Guillaume that the mishap had been due to his own carelessness.

"It was foolish to have ventured out of the house," he said. "I fell into my old habit of loitering to watch the passers-by and the streets of Paris and then the hood fell from my face. As luck would have it, a sergeant was passing who knew François Villon and although he could not be certain of me, so much had I altered, he took me along for questioning, and the very sight of the torture-chamber made me tell them who I was. And that devilish sergeant, annoyed by my denials, trumped up a charge of robbery against me and declared that he had seen me pilfering a market-woman's basket."

"Don't bother your head about that!" interjected Guillaume. "You are a free man with the King's pardon and not one of them can touch you so long as you behave yourself. But this new provost, as I have told you, is on the watch for wrongdoers."

"There's no more warning necessary," said François. "Once before I told you the same thing, but this time the craving for pleasure has gone from me and it'll be no hardship to keep out of mischief. I've seen all I want to see of the inside of prisons. But my pardon must have cost you a good few coppers!"

"The agreement is to pay back a hundred and twenty crowns in three years," muttered Guillaume.

"A heavy load is forty crowns a year!" said François. "That unlucky robbery! Shall we never see the end of its evils?"

"Maybe the vineyard will have to go," answered Guillaume,

still ask what has happened to the François Villon who used to make their drinking so lively. But why have you made such a vow?"

"As you notice, Robin, I have changed, and the change has been brought about by sufferings enough to take the mind of Bacchus himself off wine and merrymaking. What's more, I've found ghosts melancholy company."

"Ghosts, François?"

"He means Regnier de Montigny and Colin de Cayeux," said Rogier Pichart.

"Colin!" cried François. "Do you mean to say they've got Colin, the crafty locksmith's son and the shrewdest man in Paris?"

"Why, haven't you heard?" said Rogier Pichart. "Your friend Colin was taken and strung up for a robbery at Montpipeau o Rueil on the road to Orléans in September last year."

"The year before, fourteen-sixty," interjected Robin Dogis.

"Fourteen-sixty!" muttered François. "That was just after my first taste of prison at Orléans when the coming of the little princes saved me from death. So Colin and I were near each other when he cut his last caper."

And over his mind blew the same chill wind of fear that had come upon him in Blois when he had heard of Regnier's death. When would his own turn come, how was it that he came to be spared? Did God design his punishment to be the worst, ordaining it so that he was to watch his friends pass away one after the other leaving him lonely, comfortless, and frightened?

The others sat in silence for a while, respecting his sorrow or his memories, but then began to draw his mind away, speaking of Paris those five years of his absence.

"And especially has the legend of François Villon increased," said Robin Dogis. "The poem you left behind was a great success. But the story of your life with Margot and the exploits of you and many companions were even greater successes. Not a day passes without some mention of you and your friends. Some of the tales they enjoy are true and some imaginary, the details becoming more perfect with each telling, but all serve the purpose of making you name legendary and, as the years go on, the legend will increase."

"Why," interposed Rogier Pichart, "you need only announce yourself at the taverns to have as many free drinks and women as you can manage, on the strength of your name alone! I shouldn't let such an opportunity slip and I can't imagine why you don't show yourself and become the uncrowned king of Paris."

"I've lost interest in such things," said François, "and haven't even been to see Margot. I have lived my life. My work is done."

my friends dead or gone away, and all I ask is the chance to live peacefully in my uncle's house in the cloister."

"That doesn't sound much like the François Villon I've heard about!" said Rogier Pichart.

"I don't know that I feel much like the François Villon you've heard about. But I will say there's just this much of interest left to me in life. There is a long poem I've written, too long for Rogier Pichart to read, that means a lot to me, and I should like to leave it to Paris. And knowing how you used to treasure my early works, Robin, I came to you to-night thinking that you might care to look after this poem for me now that I haven't the impulse to do it for myself."

"That would be an honour I should never forget," said Robin Dogis, "and I'm anxious to read the poem at once."

"There's a copy in my uncle's house," answered François, "and if you'll come along after supper is finished I'll hand it over to you. This writing has become an obsession with me and even the death of a friend fetches nothing but a poem from me these days. When you told me of Colin's death a while back and sat quiet, respecting the sorrow your news would bring, after the first shock of fear there began to run a poem in my mind, and even in that interval I was busy composing a new poem; a short poem to serve as a warning to men of Colin's trade, men such as your impatient friend Rogier Pichart here. The first verse will go like this, I think:

Beaux enfans, vous perdez la plus
Belle rose de vo chapeau;
Mes clers pres prenans comme glus,
Si vous allez a Montpipeau
Ou a Rueil, gardez la peau;
Car, pour s'esbatre en ces deux lieux,
Cuidant que vaulsist le rappeau,
La perdit Colin de Cayeux."

"Good, very good," said Rogier Pichart, "and I know a good line of poetry when I hear one, rough fighting man as I am. But I care little for warnings in good poetry or bad. A short life and a gay one, say I."

"Familiar sentiments!" said François. "But all this is by the way. If you'll come to Saint-Benoît, Robin, you shall have the poem and I think it will please you."

"Hutin and I will come to see you get there safely," cried Rogier Pichart. "I myself am taken with the idea of this poem."

It was about seven by that time and pitch-dark when the four of them started out down the rue de la Parcheminerie on their way to Guillaume's house. Rogier Pichart had taken more than his

share of wine and was singing at the top of his voice, but Robin Dogis saw that the noise made François uneasy and told his friend to keep quiet. And so they groped their way along in silence, broken only by the oaths from Rogier Pichart as he stumbled over a stall left outside a house.

At the end of the street they saw a light shining from the window of a lawyer's house where the clerks sat writing busily, heads bent over the task which had kept them so late at work.

"Ah, the home of that respectable lawyer, François de Ferrebouc," said François. "To think that I once worked in that place!"

"To hell with all lawyers!" cried Rogier Pichart. "The dirty, snivelling rats!"

And planting himself in front of the window, fingers to nose, Rogier taunted the clerks, calling them cowards and pen-pushers, spitting at the window. The clerks accepted the challenge and, taking candles, rushed out into the street, asking what ruffians were there.

"Is it ruffians you are calling us?" cried Rogier. "Will you be buying flutes to-day, my masters, are you spoiling for a fight? Does your blood boil and splutter in your veins? Will you be taking me on here, drunk as I am and outnumbered?"

His harangue was interrupted by an attack from the clerks and, in the struggle that followed, Hutin du Moustier was captured and carried into the house, despite his loud cries of murder. And disturbed by the noise of the fighting François de Ferrebouc himself rushed from an inner room of his house, asking what the noise was about and if they had all taken leave of their senses. The lawyer took in the situation at a glance, and coming upon Robin Dogis he sent him sprawling into the gutter. The blow made Robin lose his temper for he had only been trying to restrain the drunken fury of Rogier Pichart, the cause of all the trouble, but forgetting his good intentions in the mud of the gutter, Robin drew his dagger and slashed out at François de Ferrebouc, taking to his heels with Rogier Pichart when he saw the lawyer fall wounded.

At the first sign of trouble François had slipped to one side out of the light. He remembered his uncle's advice to steer clear of the law and was determined to avoid foolishness of that sort. None of the clerks knew him, but after François de Ferrebouc had pushed Robin Dogis into the gutter, and stood looking for fresh worlds to conquer, he caught sight of François lurking in the shadows and shouted his name.

"I heard you were back, Master François," he cried. "You've soon taken to your old ways and bad company again and you can rest assured more will be heard of this outrage——"

Robin's dagger then ripped at his shoulder and, waiting for no more, François ran back to Saint-Benoît, cursing the hesitation which had made him stay so long.

Gasping for breath, he rushed into Guillaume's study and blurted out the unlucky tale. "It happened in a flash, uncle," he said, "and I hadn't a chance."

Guillaume could not conceal his anxiety and said that was the sort of mischance he had feared.

"Ferrebourg has no great liking for me," the canon said, "and he is not the man to forgive an injury to his own dignity. But you are innocent, and surely justice cannot be so perverted that an innocent man is condemned because of his past?"

"We must hope for the best," said François. "But I am afraid they will be coming for me to-night and there's no strength in me for running away again. However, let's not meet trouble half-way. There's a new poem I thought of to-night to be inserted in my Testament. Let me do that in case I don't get another chance and then we'll pass the time with a game of chess."

The poem was soon written out, Guillaume marvelling that his nephew should think of his work even when in such danger, but they had not finished one game of chess before the steady tramp of armed men could be heard outside. They sat poised in silence, listening to Marthe's voice raised in protest. But their door was thrown open and a sergeant came clumsily into the room whilst archers guarded the threshold.

"I'm sorry to trouble you, Father," said the sergeant. "But my orders are to take François Villon to the Châtelet for questioning over an affair in the rue de la Parcheminerie this evening."

"I'm ready," said François. "Let's get away from here."

He turned to Guillaume and asked his pardon, saying that the fates were against them, but the priest was speechless with the shock of the new sorrow, and before words came to him François was gone; leaving Marthe to fuss distractedly over her master, slapping his hands and rubbing vinegar on his forehead.

Then Guillaume cried aloud in his anguish, saying that François was right. "God must be against us," the canon said, "or else why has He sent my son back to me only to snatch him away again in this cynical and careless fashion? Can it be that after all there is no God?"

CHAPTER IV

ONCE in the rue Saint-Jacques, François was hustled through the sleeping town, the silence broken only occasionally by a muffled song from behind the closed shutters of a tavern. The guttering torch carried by one of the escort allowed François to see that they were passing the Petit Châtelet. Several times in his University days he had found himself on its straw: it served as a place for the students to cool their heels after some outrageous escapade, but authority evidently regarded this affair as something more serious. They crossed the Little Bridge and the Cité, coming to the Pont-au-Change, and there could be no doubt that their destination was the Grand Châtelet. Its gloomy pile of masonry could just be distinguished as they halted outside for a second. Then they passed between the deep shadows of its sinister turrets and François felt a sudden spasm of terror seize his body. Involuntarily there came back to his mind the pit at Meung and that day when he was first racked. Although he had taken no part in the brawl at the lawyer's house, François felt that this time they intended to finish with him, a man could not go on escaping death as he had done. His nerves began to slip and he wanted to scream hysterically.

Inside the prison, the chief gaoler asked routine questions without looking up from his ledger, and François made a great effort to steady himself. He believed that he finally succeeded in keeping his face still and impassive, save for a nervous tic in one cheek that he could feel jumping up and down.

The formality of his reception was quickly completed and one of the gaolers, rattling his keys carelessly and not even glancing at him, led François down stone steps and pushed him into a dungeon. Another man stood in the cell and, by the light of the gaoler's lantern, François saw the scared face of Hutin du Moustier, the young friend of Robin Dogis and Rogier Pichart. François was struck by his look of utter desolate fright and got a mean sort of comfort from the sight of somebody more scared than himself.

The door clanged behind the gaoler, and the only light left to them was the stump of a candle. They stood listening to the receding echo of the man's footsteps. Then Hutin grabbed his arm.

"Come, you know I didn't do anything," he blurted out, "not a thing. It was Rogier Pichart, the drunken fool. They can't hang you because a friend takes more drink than he can carry!"

"Don't worry your head, lad!" answered François. "I believe I'm the one they are after: you just happened to be near."

"Mother of Christ, it's the torture I can't stand!" cried Hutin, biting his nails. "I know I couldn't bear it. I never have been strong, there's no denying that."

François hesitated, looking at Hutin du Moustier. He had hardly noticed the boy at supper, for his quarrelsome friend, Rogier Pichart, was the one to catch the eye. He saw that this Hutin du Moustier was a mere lad of nineteen or twenty years. He was tall and slim and fair in complexion, with a delicate, thin face, a sharp-pointed nose, wide ears that stuck out in engaging fashion, liquid brown eyes and chestnut-coloured, wavy hair. It was a clean, attractive face, almost beautiful, perhaps spoiled by the too-milky skin and the rosy red of the lips. But the women ready to fawn on him would consider even this no flaw. A boy obviously destined to be spoiled by women, what was he doing in the rough, hard-sweating company of the likes of Rogier Pichart?

"Come, lad, I'm experienced at this game!" said François, putting his hand on the boy's shoulder. "For once, François Villon is going to preach a sermon. Let's make ourselves as comfortable as possible on this sorry-looking affair they call a bed and talk of anything but torture and hanging and death."

He pushed Hutin on to the straw, piling it round his body, and did the same for himself.

"That's better, warmth is the first thing to look for," he continued. "And there's one other blessing we've got, the fact of each other's company. It's surprising what a man can stand so long as he doesn't look ahead and worry himself into the grave. Tell me about yourself."

The full colour began to come back in the boy's cheeks and he looked gratefully at François. "The gaoler was kind and gave me that candle, knowing I was frightened," he said. "Perhaps they won't hang me."

"Hang you! Why, Henri Cousin won't be knotting his noose for you when he's got François Villon as a customer, the man who helped to rob the College of Navarre and led such a disgraceful life that all decent people stop their noses when he comes round the corner! But you haven't told me about yourself."

"There's nothing to tell. Probably you have better tales, sir."

"Very probably, but my memory has become faulty with old age. Let me have a try at you. A student at University who has conveniently left his gown at home?"

"True enough," said Hutin. "I take my examination for the Master of Arts degree next June."

"With a doting mother, probably widowed, who scrapes the money to pay your purse at college; a personal liking for Marion

and Isabeau and Jeanneton in the streets and a most highly developed talent for getting rid of money in any place?"

"My mother carries on my father's old business as tripe-dresser in the Halles quarter, and for the rest, you're right again."

"And no doubt you are relying on Rogier Pichart to help you in your difficulties?"

"Well, he takes an interest in me and has much experience——"

"I don't doubt it, lad, I don't doubt it," interjected François. "But it needs only half an eye to see that he'll be dancing on air before so very long."

François paused and then got to his feet, shrugging his shoulders ruefully and brushing the straw from his person. He began to pace the narrow cell, causing the candle to flicker and throw his shadow grotesquely about the walls.

"Well, I never thought to be doing this," he continued. "I have always said that no man should preach to another, but I like the look of you and I can't stand by and see you taking the same path I took without raising a finger, useless as I expect my words will be. Look you, boy," he blurted out shamefacedly, "I'm going over on the side of the moralists and a pretty sight I must look amongst them. I can feel them drawing hastily away from their unexpected supporter. But I tell you, it's a mug's game you are playing!"

He looked at Hutin's face and then continued, almost breathlessly: "Oh, I've no doubt you think you're clever enough not to get caught. Well, we all think that, and most of us do get caught nevertheless. I could draw you a pretty picture of my sufferings: you'd see how so-called pleasure turns to ashes in the mouth. But all you need do is to look at me. Just over thirty and as good as finished!"

Hutin made polite noises of deprecation but François stopped his pacing and glared at him. "What's the use of pretending? Practically bald, shrivelled up like an old pea, in a perpetual ague; why, many men of eighty have better bodies than mine! Then what have I in the world to call my own? Not one single thing. Neither is there one place I can rest in peace, save the house where I was first taken in charity when I was nine years old. Above all, there is nobody left I can call friend. I, François Villon, who once had so many friends! What use have those friends been to me? Yet had I followed the advice of my good uncle I should have had a house of my own and a living and a respected position."

"Somehow those solid things have always appeared rather heavy," began Hutin.

But François would not let him finish. "I know what you're

going to say. Dull and bourgeois, better to live dangerously than too comfortably. I know, I know, and grant you there is something in it. But so long as you don't make gods of security and respectability, a house and a settled place in the world need not make you dull. And, apart from this material reasoning, I have lately come to believe that a man who satisfies only his animal cravings is living only half a life. Without being altogether a saint, a man should try to leave mankind a little the richer for his living . . ."

Hutin stifled a yawn and François slapped him on the back, laughing. "A lot of use my words will be!" he cried. "But always remember that an old monkey displeases everybody, especially himself. Look, it is an old monkey who tells you so!"

Hutin politely thanked him for his advice and said that at the moment he was determined to follow it exactly.

"I know," answered François, grinning. "It'll be different when you get outside but I've done my best, the first conversion I have ever tried!"

And, settling down in the straw again, he began to entertain Hutin with tales of the taverns, as if to show the boy that it was not such a dull dog he had to deal with as might have been thought. He talked as brilliantly as of old, allowing no hint to appear that he expected the gallows to be his early fate.

The authorities appeared to forget them and in the next fortnight a quick friendship was struck up between the two of them, a friendship in which the gaoler also had his share. For one of Villon's old friends, Casin Cholet, the expert duck-stealer and a sergeant at the Châtelet, had volunteered for the position on hearing that François Villon had been brought in from the dead.

But on Christmas Eve, 1462, at eleven o'clock in the forenoon, Casin Cholet called François out of the cell.

"Has the time come, Casin?" asked François.

"Yes, they're ready for you," answered Casin.

Neither spoke again and Casin led François to the Great Hall of the Châtelet. There on a raised dais sat the new Provost of Paris, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, with two other judges and his Criminal Lieutenant, Pierre de la Dehors, below him. François was placed between the gaoler and an archer, and the Criminal Lieutenant, a short fat man with an incurably jovial expression on his face, began to read legal documents aloud in a breathless gabble. The Latin was read at such a speed that François could make little of it and nobody else in court seemed to be paying any attention. The lawyers in the body of the court chatted pleasantly to each other, yawned occasionally, or picked their teeth.

"A poor way to kick a man out of the world!" muttered François to the gaoler. "They might at least listen!"

A mask of official woodenness had come on Casin's face, he remained dumb, and then, looking at him, a few words caught Villon's ear. "The said François Villon, being of incurably bad habits, is therefore to be taken out at the King's pleasure and forthwith hanged and strangled."

It was all over. The lawyers began to shuffle their papers for the next case and Casin touched François on the arm. At that he came to himself.

"It's a trick," he cried, at the top of his voice. "I appeal. I appeal to the King and to the Church. I did nothing and I have a pardon for my other sins. I appeal, you will hear more of this——"

He was hustled out of the court and Casin held his arm.

"Well, it's come as I expected, Casin," François said, as they walked back to the dungeon. "We'll never eat another stolen duck together. But what a trial! You would have imagined they were deciding some dull point of Church ritual, not whether a human being should live or die! But I'll not go out without a fight. Let me have pen and paper, will you, and I'll send a message to my uncle and an appeal to the court."

"At once, François," Casin answered. "But they surely can't stick to the death sentence!"

"We shall soon know," answered François. Then at the cell door, struck by a sudden thought, he placed his hand on Casin's arm. "Another favour, Casin," he said. "Don't tell the boy inside what has happened. It would frighten him to death if he knew he was caged up with a dead man."

"I'll remember, but you may find things difficult at times."

"I'll put up with that," answered François. "There's no need to upset the lad."

Hutin was waiting anxiously. "Where have you been, François? Why have they left me alone?" he cried.

"A little indignity they called my trial!"

"There was, of course, no question of hanging?"

"No question at all," said François, with a wry grin. "I'm to be whipped and banished from Paris for six months."

"Ah, it might have been much worse!" said Hutin.

"My back is tough and the flogging of another man never seems so bad as it might be!"

"Was anything said about me?"

"Not a word," answered François. "They'll keep you a little longer and then you'll be pushed out with a warning."

The rest of the day passed in playing glic and in talking, the constant amusements to which both had become used, and at dusk Hutin yawned and said he would turn in. The words were hardly spoken before he was asleep on his straw, leaving François to wonder how much longer they would give him to play glic. He shuffled the cards and thoughtlessly began to deal them. Then, remembering his uncomfortable future, he swept them with a curse from the rough table and picked up the pen left him by Casin.

Yet what could he usefully say? It had come at last. His capers were at an end and they meant to see that he did not escape again. Why not accept that? There was no point in dragging out his life a year or two longer. It was strange to think that miserable dungeon would be the last home he would see on earth but it seemed best to let the end come whilst he was in that detached mood. There was none of the frantic fear he had experienced at Meung, only a mild interest in the fact that soon he would be rotting and yet Paris would go on just as before. Who would miss him? His uncle certainly, but not his mother, for she would already have a vision of him amongst the saints, so long was it since she had seen him. As for the men who lived after him, not many would hear of him, but these few would think him a poor specimen indeed. Some might be interested in his poetry, but those would sum him up as a poor drab of letters, with a patchy culture and lack of a deep philosophy. Well, that might have come had he lived a few years longer but how much nearer goodness and knowledge would he have been, in the ultimate and infinite?

And to the average man, who would hear a tale or two of a roistering poet, he would appear shiftless and weak and deserving only of contempt. The comfortable man who goes through life with a full belly and his little standards of right and wrong and his little unsuspected vilenesses would be merciless in his indictment of that fool, François Villon. François did not give a denier for this man but he wondered if he should leave a poem addressed to him, because, in the end, all men are brothers, even the most stupid. It would be no use appealing to this man's reason for, through the ages, he has had none; only his pity can sometimes be touched.

Then, his eyes dwelling thoughtfully on the yellow, death-like face of the boy sleeping on the straw in the light of the candle, his mind reverted to the thought of his own body after death, always a fruitful subject with him, and on the swell of that thought François took up his pen and began to write. He wrote far into the night, by the flickering candle-stump; by morning light he had finished that poem he called the "Ballade of the Hanged," and in this

writing the mood of sweet exaltation he had known in the monastery again brought him comfort.

But that Christmas of 1462 brought not the least comfort to Guillaume de Villon in Saint-Benoît. After François had been led away, the canon soon recovered his balance of mind, the first time he had denied his God. For he could not believe that any court of law would convict on such a charge. The Provost might be powerful but the law would not so far lose its reason. Yet he could get no word of François. His applications were turned aside and it was not until Christmas Day that Henri Thiboust, a monk of Saint-Benoît and the brother of a judge of the Criminal Court, called to see Guillaume.

"News at last!" said the canon. "Why have my efforts been ignored? Surely I have a right to know what has become of my nephew? But come to my study and warm yourself by the fire, whilst Marthe heats some wine for you."

"Don't disturb yourself," muttered Thiboust. "You will find I shall not be long here. I have just come to tell you——"

But Thiboust found difficulty in getting his news out and, after hesitating and warming his hands at the fire, he suddenly turned to Guillaume and told him to trust in God. "Your nephew, François Villon, was condemned to death yesterday!" he cried.

"Trust in God, did you say?" muttered Guillaume. "I don't believe it. They could not condemn François for watching a brawl, no matter how much they disliked his past way of living."

"My brother told me that he argued against it with all his strength," said Thiboust, "but this new Provost is determined to sweep the town clean, as he calls it. 'Maybe François Villon does not deserve death now,' the Provost said, 'but he has in the past, many times, and always wriggled clear, so that he can't justly complain. He will never be a good citizen or of use to anybody and is best out of the way.' That was his argument."

At that moment there was a knock at the house door, and soon Marthe came in with a letter. "For you, master, and from the prison, so the messenger says."

Guillaume opened the note hastily and read it with an expressionless face.

"What does he say?" asked Thiboust.

"There is just one verse of poetry entitled the 'Ballade of the Hanged,'" muttered Guillaume, offering the paper. "Read it."

"I cannot, for I have left my spectacles in the chantry," said Thiboust, "and being so much engaged in close work on vellum——"

"Listen, then," said Guillaume, clearing his throat abruptly:

"Frères humains qui après nous vivez,
 N'ayez les cuers contre nous endurcis,
 Car, se pitié de nous povres avez,
 Dieu en aura plus tost de vous mercis.
 Vous nous voiez cy attachez cinq, six;
 Quant de la chair, que trop nous avons nourrie,
 Elle est pieça dévorée et pourrie,
 Et nous, les os, devons cendre et pouldre,
 De nostre mal personne ne s'en rie;
 Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre!"

A silence fell on the room whilst the echoes died slowly away. Then Guillaume, with tears in his eyes, threw the paper on the floor. "Even death only calls a poem from him!" he cried.

"It is his way of asking you for help," muttered Thiboust. "But what a poet, Guillaume, my friend, what a poet! Hurry and make them understand it is a great poet they propose to butcher. My brother has sent you a note that may get you even an audience with the King, if that should be necessary."

Guillaume lost no time in following that advice: his patient figure was to be seen in the waiting-room of practically every influential man in Paris, with the result that on the morning of January 4th, 1463, Casin Cholet burst into Villon's dungeon with the news that the death-sentence had been commuted.

"What, saved yet again!" cried François, throwing his arms round Casin. "Tell me, Casin, was I a fool to appeal? After all, every beast likes his own skin and I wasn't a bird with the pip that I should keep quiet when they sang me such an ugly tune. If I hadn't bellowed, I should by this time have been stuck upright in the fields like a wisp of straw!"

"And now you'll be able to keep an eye on me to see that I follow your good advice, François!" cried Hutin joyfully.

But in the midst of their excitement Casin remembered something that apparently gave him little pleasure. He was a tall, comical fellow with an enormous Adam's apple that rose up and down in his throat when he was embarrassed. He stood swallowing soundlessly in this way for some seconds and then began to find words.

"Ah, François, just a minute—there's something—just a little thing I forgot—how it could have slipped my memory—but there's no need for Hutin du Moustier to stay at all, no need at all. You can clear off out of it. Your release has come unconditionally from to-day, but in the case of François there are one or two formalities, just a matter of form, he'll be able to follow you to-morrow."

"Well, I've seen enough of this hole," cried Hutin joyfully.

"I'll waste no time in leaving it. But I'll be waiting for you in the Fir-Cone to-morrow evening, François. Is that a promise?"

"Yes, lad, I'll be there," said François, still looking at Casin. "You run along as fast as you like."

Casin Cholet led the boy to the prison gates and then returned to Villon's cell, where he began to clear away the dinner-plates.

"Well, Casin, what is it?" said François quietly.

"Just this," answered Casin, looking up. "You have been saved from hanging but are to be banished from Paris for ten years. That's what the reverend gentlemen have decided."

"Ten years of banishment!" cried François. "They might as well have killed me!"

And the thought of suicide flashed into his mind until he remembered Guillaume. "Bah, my uncle will soon get that altered," he said. "Tell me, Casin, when am I supposed to be leaving?"

"You must be out of the town by noon to-morrow, January fifth."

"That won't do at all," cried François. "My uncle will be able to get this sentence of banishment repealed but he may need a day or two in which to work. I'll ask for three days of grace in which to say good-bye to my friends. They don't know I have not one, except a broken-down old duck-thief!"

The request was written in another poem in which François lavished praise on the court for granting him his life and begged the three days' respite. His appeal was granted within a few hours, and when Casin Cholet opened the door of his prison next day he said there must be magic in that pen of his. And, as he let François into the street, he said that he wished he had the secret of it, for he would make himself governor of the prison within a week.

CHAPTER V

GUILLAUME was waiting outside the prison gates and, with a quiet smile of greeting, the two linked arms and walked slowly back to Saint-Benoît.

It was a fine winter's day with snow crunching underfoot, the air keen and fresh, and sniffing it after the foul air of his cell, seeing the streets of Paris once more, François felt hope stir for a second. There was a sudden echo of his old joy in life

but, turning to his uncle to explain this new health, he saw that the canon was looking far from cheerful.

"Well, uncle," he said, "I took your advice and here I am, safe and sound as I ever shall be. This bright morning, coming after the gloom of the prison, almost gives me hope for the future, but I'm not so foolish as to imagine that my own appeal had much to do with my release. If you hadn't worked for me, pulling the strings as usual, nothing would have saved my life."

Guillaume made no answer to this and stared straight ahead. François believed that he would have spoken had not emotion choked his throat, and uneasily he told his uncle that only one more favour was necessary. "Perhaps you even have the good news ready for me, perhaps the three days were unnecessary——"

Guillaume gripped François by the shoulder and said he knew what he was driving at. "But I have been told that the sentence of banishment must stand," he cried. "Nothing on earth can alter it."

The two men faced each other on the footway, jostled by the passers-by, and François said it was his death sentence. "They needn't have made it ten years," he said.

"It would not do for me to give you the least hope. I have tried every possible means. My appeals have reached the King himself but now my influence is all used up."

"No hope, uncle, even in your mind?"

"None at all, François."

His voice broke and not another word was spoken until they reached Saint-Benoît, when François said that the news was a worse blow than any death-sentence.

"I have come to rely so much upon you that I never doubted the banishment would be evaded," he said. "How can I live again as I lived through those five years of my previous exile? The strength is not in me to endure it."

And Guillaume suggested that he should go with François and share his travels. "You can't refuse me this time, François. I can sell my houses and we can live in Burgundy, where we should be left in peace."

"It's like you to make this offer again," answered François. "But how can I agree? You know as well as I do that such an uprooting at your age would kill you."

"Better risk my own death, François. How can I bear to end my days here, knowing that you are an outlaw and maybe dead and I without the burying of you? You are condemning me to a terrible fate; the sickness of a lonely ending endured without hope. Before, I always had the belief that you would return home, but now

I am such an old man. I feel an old man, François. The last few days have broken me and ten years is too long for an old man to wait."

And François, looking at his uncle, said that he was right. "You have suffered too much through me, and so long as you do not ask me to take you away from Paris I will do whatever you wish, anything to give you some peace of mind."

"Then the only hope I can see is for you to return to God," cried Guillaume. "I hope I am not thrusting upon you the vocation you rightly rejected at the beginning of your life but, now your work has been done, surely your only course is to seek out some country monastery where you can pass your time in peace and safety. You may even have the strength return for living."

"It's a strange pass to be brought to, after fleeing from the cloister all those years ago," said François. "But I have said I will do whatever you ask."

"I should rest happy here could I be sure that you were in safety," answered Guillaume.

And with the realisation that less than two days were left to them they spoke of other matters, trying to forget the melancholy parting so soon to come.

Next day, François thought of his poem and, asking Guillaume if he could be spared for an hour, he set out to see Margot, knowing that she was the only instrument left to him. Robin Dogis had told him that her house was in the rue de Glatigny, and hurrying there, not wishing to sentimentalise over the streets of Paris, he discovered that the house was dirty and tumble-down, much below the standard of her other houses. He was shown upstairs round the back of the house, where he found Margot waiting in a small bedroom.

"François!" she cried. "François, I hardly dared hope, but when a stranger is announced my heart always beats quicker."

They stood staring at each other and François was shocked to see how fat and blowzy Margot had become. She was carelessly dressed and had run completely to seed, with fat, hanging cheeks and breasts, reminding him of the butcher's dirty wife at Orléans. But he realised that Margot was looking at him in much the same way.

"Yes, Margot, you may well stare," he said. "It's nothing but a walking ghost come to see you and make one last request. How is the house doing, Margot?"

"Badly, François," she answered. "Not so well as before by half and never will be unless you come back. It wasn't for that, was it, that you've——"

"No, Margot, there's no heart left in me for laughter and drinking. I've suffered too much, the life being crushed out of me by a Christian priest."

And he told her something of his adventures and of his banishment from Paris, until she was moved to tears and the cursing of Catherine de Vausselles.

"If it hadn't been for that bitch, Sermoise would never have been killed and you'd have kicked in bed with me all these years."

But her anger roused no answering spark in François. Even resentment against Catherine had been crushed out of him and it seemed to Margot that François was not much longer for this world. Her simple mind was shocked by this as it had never been before. For the first time, she realised the ponderous inevitability of fate and stood there helpless, the tears rolling down her cheeks.

"All these years I have patiently waited," she cried, "only to have you come back to me like this."

At last, she pulled her lover on the bed and stroked his head, whilst François fell to wondering if his life would have been different had he known a constant love for one woman. And as he looked at Margot, hysterical in her grief, he realised that she was capable of such a love. She too would have been saved from drifting into what she had become, but something was lacking in himself and, because of that lack, her life had been ruined and she was become yet another of his lost opportunities.

But soon, easing her grief, François told Margot that he would hold only three people in his heart: Guillaume, his mother, and Margot herself. "Our living together was, in spite of all, one of the few happy times in my life," he said, "and perhaps excelled only by the happiness I had a few months back."

"Who was the woman?" said Margot.

"No woman, Margot, for my time was passed in a monastery. I wrote a poem and you are best suited to spread word of it. You did well by the other poem I left behind when I went away before."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Just this," said François. "Get hold of somebody with a good presence and a fine resonant voice and a liking for the sound of poetry. Get him to read a little of my Testament in your house each evening, a little only, mark you, and the news of it will spread so that the whole town will want to visit your house. Thus both our purposes will be served. Your house will regain popularity and Paris will hear my poetry."

"A brilliant notion!" said Margot. "I should be thanking you for such a chance . . ."

But François was not listening and tonelessly his voice droned on,

assuring her that the people would surely come. "They won't understand," he cried. "When I'm most serious, they'll think I'm writing with my tongue in my cheek. They will ask how they can be expected to take such a man seriously: a brawler, a thief, a pimp, a tramp, a man who broke his kind uncle's heart and, above all, a man who was generally known as the despised and rejected lover. There is one character only slightly less ridiculous than a cuckold and that is a man turned down by his mistress. But, although they won't understand, they will like the sound of my verses and repeat them to their wives and friends. Should you need more copies, then you can always get hold of Guy Tabary, a man who always speaks and writes the truth."

"His mother has agreed to pay back the money he stole," said Margot, "and so he is still about the town. We heard how the mean little rat gave you away, blabbing the tale of the robbery at Navarre, but we put up with him. He's useful and asks for little enough. I believe he's in the kitchen now if you'd care to speak to him."

"No, I don't want to see him," said François. "Sight of his stupid eyes would make me laugh, laughter which would be very near to tears."

The situation was becoming too much for Margot and she gabbled breathlessly, saying that they had heard François had come back and was living respectably and they had not dared to approach him and that she was not surprised at his decision to live decently with his uncle as he was always too good for their way of living. Her chatter began to annoy François, although he realised that she was only nervous, and he prepared to go. Sight of this steadied Margot and she asked if he remembered how he once tried to cheer her up by painting a picture of themselves happily married and going to church with three or four children trailing behind.

"How I wish that could have come about!" she said.

François smiled at her eagerness and said that it was not to be, although he had often thought of it when he was in trouble and wandering homeless over France.

"Why shouldn't we go away together now?" cried Margot. "Let me come with you from Paris and leave all this. We can find shelter together somewhere, anywhere, and had I known where you had gone I should have left Antoine and come to you long ago."

François was touched by her devotion and said that she knew it would not do. "How would you get on away from Paris, you'd be like a bird without its nest," he said.

"A bird can build a new nest anywhere," she answered, "and

I would rather be a tramp on the roads than living here without you."

"No, it can't be done," said François. "I'm going to a monastery, or so my uncle thinks. What's more to the point, if you leave Paris, there will be nobody to spread knowledge of my poem. My poetry is all I've got from life: my only monument."

Margot accepted her defeat with bowed head and said that she would do whatever François thought best. "You may be sure that I'll take good care of the work you have left me!" she cried. "Let any fool laugh at you or your poetry in my house and he'll soon find himself outside with his ears boxed."

His resolution was wavering before her love and sturdy simplicity. Farewells had best be cut short before sadness overwhelmed them and so he told her that that was his last day in Paris. He must be ten miles away, out of the forbidden area, before noon the next day.

"I feel that what remains of this last Sunday should be spent with my uncle," he said.

"The poor man deserves at least that consideration," said Margot, "and I'll not detain you. But you must take this money before I let you go—no, don't argue, François. You must let me do this little thing, especially now you have given me a poem which will keep me in comfort for the rest of my life. And now I will let you out of the back door again so that you may avoid meeting Antoine and Guy Tabary."

Her last kiss was on his lips, and as he turned at the corner of the street to wave farewell, Margot was still standing sorrowful in the doorway, head bowed, her eyes, he was sure, blinded with tears. There are two who will grieve for my loss, he thought, and perhaps no man can expect more. There is also my mother. Am I to say good-bye to her? Should I disturb her memories by presenting myself as the haggard scarecrow I have become? And he decided that it would be best to leave his mother to herself and her prayers: a decision with which Guillaume heartily agreed.

"She is old, François," he said, "older than I and full of dreams. It would be difficult to make her understand what is happening and the final telling would frighten her. You would be a stranger. Let her believe that your poem has been sent to her from her son in the Holy Land."

And then the last evening began to draw in upon them: an evening spent before the fire as they had spent so many: with wine and quiet gossip of the past and Marthe brought in for some time to keep them company. François felt that he should have a great deal to say but somehow words would not come. There was an air of unreality about them and then, as he looked at Guillaume

and tried to speak his thanks and regrets, he knew that there would be little talk between them that evening. Words were useless for, at such a time, there could be nothing but a striving against sadness, and the end of that day came as a relief to them both.

On the morning of the next day, January 8th, 1463, they began their last walk together down the rue Saint-Jacques. As François tore himself from the arms of Marthe, giving the crying servant a last embrace, a man stepped up to Guillaume and announced that he was the executioner of Paris.

"I am sorry to intrude on your sorrow, reverend father," he said, "but I have orders to see your nephew safely out of Paris."

"For the moment, I imagined you had come for another purpose," cried Guillaume. "Take this coin to buy yourself a drink and I am sure that you will walk some distance behind us and allow me this last walk alone with my nephew."

"That I will, sir," said the executioner. "My orders are to see François Villon out of Paris, there's nothing to say that I must grab hold of his arm, and I'm sure your reverence would not be playing any tricks on me."

"A commentary on my life!" muttered François. "It's a pretty ending to be escorted out of Paris by the public hangman!"

"Don't think of it!" said Guillaume.

And as they walked silently down the street, towards the gates, François found everything more fantastic and unreal than ever. He was getting his last sight of Paris and yet he could not see what was going on in its streets for the faces and the happenings he saw were those of the past. Ghosts again! he thought. My life has dragged on by some mischance and I am the only live man in a world of shadows: the quick man drinking mournfully under the gibbet whilst the corpses dance over his head.

But he bestirred himself to say something to the silent man at his side and spoke of that other time when Guillaume saw him out of Paris.

"Then my exile was thought to be for six months," he said, "and it lasted five years. If, by some miracle, I come back this time, then I shall be over forty. Villon forty years of age! It's unthinkable."

"Do not forget to let me know as soon as you have found a suitable monastery outside the forbidden area," said Guillaume, "and then my mind can be at rest."

"That I shall do," said François, "and here is a copy of my Testament made especially for you. I make a great fuss of this poem, but am I mistaken? Is it as good as I think it is?"

"Never doubt your genius," cried Guillaume. "Believe me,

such a poem has never been written before nor will be again. It will not be forgotten so long as the world lasts whole. Its fame will increase with the years."

"You are overstating the case in your eagerness to comfort me," said François, "but so it has always been. You have never failed me, my more than father, but for the moment I was ready to mistrust my own instinct and judgment. Belief in that poem will be necessary to me."

They were at the gates of Paris. The sad moment of farewell had come and François knelt in the snow to receive his uncle's blessing. The blessing was slowly given and François kissed the hem of the priest's gown and hid his face in the stuff of it, until Guillaume placed his hands on the kneeling man's shoulder and raised him to his feet. Each strove to speak words of comfort and thanks to the other until François broke away and turned his face the way he had to go.

And so François Villon passed from sight of the two men and of Paris. Vain would it be to pursue his life further, as from that day to this no man heard tell of him again. There is nothing but an idle legend, still lingering in the hearth-talk of country folk, which pretends that in his old age Master François came again to Poitou and lived in an abbey there, where he did much good for the people, devising masques and plays for their pleasure. But truth is that the days left in him when he said good-bye to Guillaume could have been but few, he being weak and fretted with much suffering.

With an unheeded farewell to Guillaume, the hangman took himself off to his home. But the thoughts of Guillaume de Villon were sad whilst he stared down the empty road, and on his way back to his house in the cloisters there came belief that he and François would never meet again. It was difficult to understand that the long, pale face could be lost to his sight for ever, but Guillaume had no doubt that it would be so. Many years of suffering had there been and seemingly in vain. Never again would he be able to welcome François back to his house, talking cheerfully and without cease in order to make him forget the long months of exile, seeing that the boy was an outcast for good and all. Until the Day of Judgment.

And Guillaume fell to meditating the life man leads on this earth, a life which appeared to be one long tragedy or, rather, a series of tragedies, the greatest of which is that man is always alone. A great light shone on the priest's mind at that moment. There is no doubt, he thought, that the closest friends of us can never know the other. A man is born alone, he lives alone, and must die alone.

Despite this, there were times when François and I approached close to each other and now he is gone and all that remains for me to do is to end my life as I have so far lived it: in quietness and seclusion and thoughts of God. To one man, there comes strife and pain: to another, peace and quietude. But no man can escape from himself, it seems that only in God is there any refuge.

And so the old man returned to his house, where he passed the remnant of his years in praying to God, with thought of François never far from his mind. But he was careless of the poetry's growing fame, almost resentful of it; caressing memories as the old art to do and coming to gain pleasure in those which to him should have seemed bitter.

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